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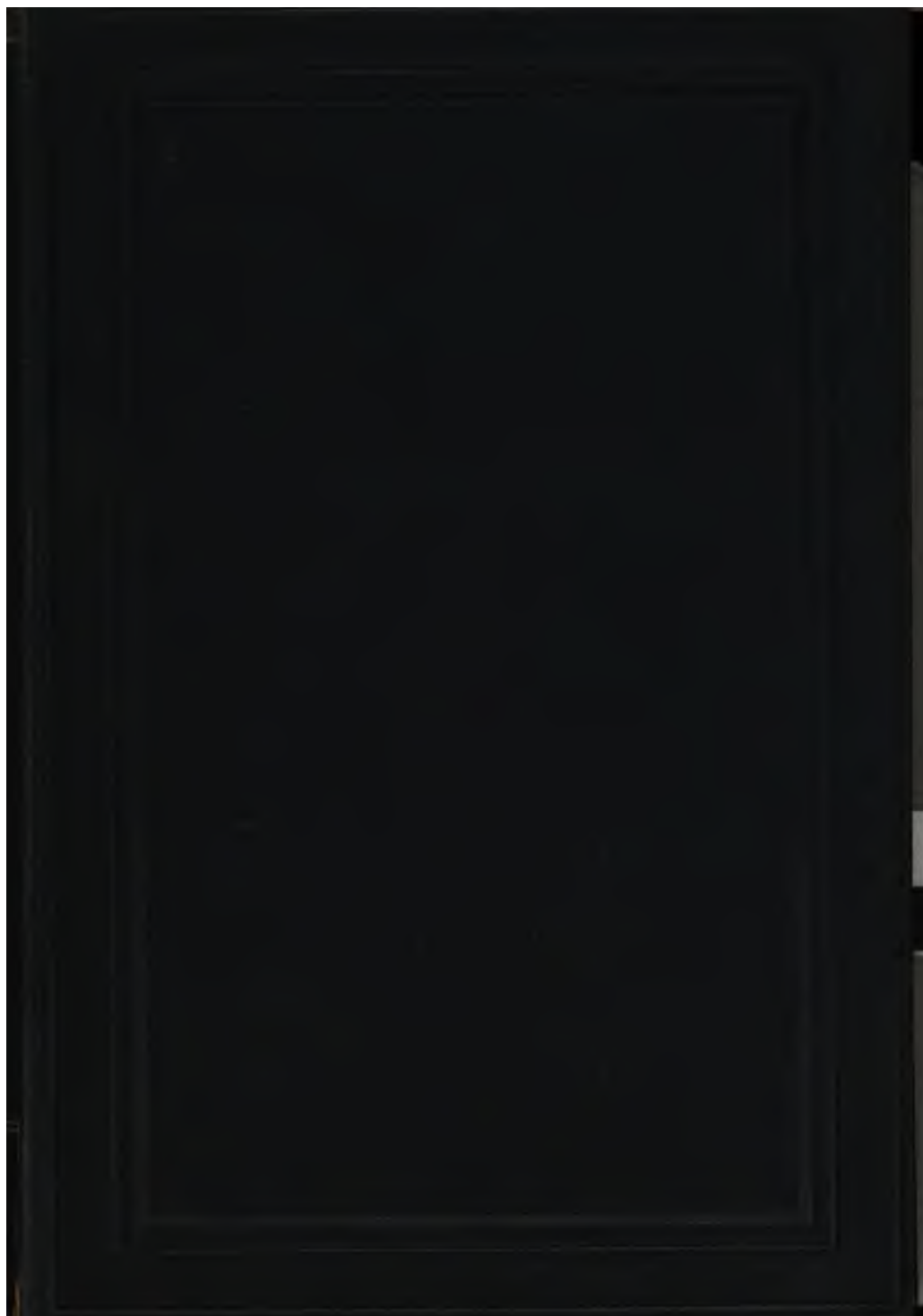
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# IN SPITE OF FORTUNE.

A Novel.

BY  
MAURICE GAY.

IN THREE VOLUMES.  
VOL. II.



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# IN SPITE OF FORTUNE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE ELMORES.

IT is the commencement of another season, and the great army of fashion advances with quick marches into London, whither the humbler toilers of life have returned long ago. The carriages of the wealthy native population no longer fill the streets in proud isolation : they are joined and eclipsed by equipages whose owners make their homes in Mayfair and Belgravia, not in the outlying suburbs which are a compromise between town and country. Delightful visions appear before the eyes of the young social *débutante*, whose only

knowledge of a ball has been gleaned from the description of her elder sisters. Back they all come, some unwillingly, of course, loth to leave the green fields, which in another month will be warmed into life again by the kindling breath of spring. But the most return with some sweet hope, some secret ambition only nursed, perhaps, in the silence of their own hearts, which this especial season shall crown with success. Back comes the astute parliamentary leader, conscious of grave faults in the management of the last session, for has not the long recess given him plenty of leisure to listen to his own reflections, and the friendly advice of colleagues, and resolved to make amends by the brilliant statesmanship of this. Back comes the ambitious author, with the skeleton of a great work already formed in his busy brain : a work that shall rouse the languid world into something like enthusiasm, and place him among the immortals of literature. Back comes the unhappy lover, hoping against hope : trusting to some

chance meeting to give him an opportunity of pleading his cause once more.

And to many outside of this small world, the advent of another season may mark a crisis in their lives : fling a ray of hope on the humble toilers, grown so accustomed to a weary lot, that they have forgotten to murmur at it. A small ray, perhaps : a light that would scarcely be distinguishable from darkness by the fortunate sons of earth who have set their ambition on the great prizes of the world, but flinging over the hearts which have never nourished a lofty yearning, the mild radiance of peace and content.

Amongst other changes wrought by the hand of time was that which had transformed Edith Barrington into Edith Elmore. They had carried out their determination of eloping, much, of course, to the chagrin of her ladyship, who manifested the seriousness of her displeasure in a stern letter, which conveyed to Edith the awful fiat that her disobedience had snapped the

filial link which united them, and rendered it impossible for them to meet again.

On the receipt of this awful epistle, Edith turned very pale : but when she had finished its perusal, her anguish knew no bounds. For although her affection for Geoffrey had impelled her to this disobedient course, she loved her mother too well to contemplate with any degree of calmness the prospect of a lifelong separation.

"I must go to her, Geoffrey : go to her at once," she had cried, wringing her hands in the intensity of her grief, "and implore her forgiveness. You must come too."

"We must go on our knees after the stage fashion, I suppose." Geoffrey had answered with a levity that was certainly ill-timed. His own dislike to his mother-in-law was too intense to allow him to comprehend the possibility of any other person liking her.

"Geoffrey, I am her only child," said Edith, drying her tears and speaking with solemn emphasis. "She loved me dearly, I know : her only anxiety was for my welfare."

So, moved by his young wife's pleading, Geoffrey consented to accompany her to the abode of the offended Lady Barrington. She received the culprits with an awful sternness, which for a long time nothing could melt ; but at length when Edith had reached the depths of despair, and Geoffrey, the height of impatience, she seemed to consider that her sense of power had been sufficiently gratified by their subjection, and granted the forgiveness which they implored with much dignity and pathos. "I am grateful that your father was not spared to witness this. A man of his rectitude and high moral principle would have been shocked beyond all power of expression at the duplicity of his own child and his old friend's son. I obey the dictates of my woman's heart rather than the sterner advice proffered by my reason, which tells me that such ingratitude, such a fearful declension from the moral path deserves no pardon ; but I can never restore you to the proud pinnacle that you both occupied in my esteem." And after

these magnanimous words, her ladyship suffered her undutiful daughter to kiss her, and Edith returned home with her husband, sustained and comforted greatly by the maternal condescension.

They had selected a small house in the neighbourhood of Tyburnia—the cheapest residence in the fashionable centres would have swallowed up a very large portion of their income—they had a brougham and a man-servant, and trusted that with strict economy they might preserve a respectable appearance. It did not prove an easy task, however. Fifteen hundred a year does not go a long way when a brougham and a man-servant are the indispensable preliminaries of housekeeping. But Edith was the most cheerful over it: she had made up her mind to a small income, and did not intend to complain of it.

“You silly boy, we are very well off,” she said, with charming hypocrisy. “A moderate income is not very much better than a small one; you cannot do much more with it. You want a *very* big income



to be rich, and give plenty of balls and dinners and fêtes, and all the rest of it."

"But you will not be able to dress well on it," said Geoffrey, ruefully.

"Beauty unadorned, you know. So long as I look nice in your eyes without expensive dress, that is all I care for. I shall not regret it, you may be sure."

And after this pretty speech, Geoffrey did what any gallant husband was bound to do under the circumstances, kissed her fondly. Marrying for love evidently suited those young people.

After a long interval, rendered necessary for the gradual healing of the wound inflicted on her susceptible feelings, Lady Barrington condescended to pay them a visit at what Geoffrey described as their "bijou" residence. She had no fault to find with the house itself, since it was a better one than they could have got for twice the money in any of those fashionable centres in which, according to her opinion, life could alone be rendered tolerable.

"It requires an acute geographical in-

stinct to discover this place," she said, contemptuously. "You are beyond the pale of civilization. You need not expect that anybody will come and see you *here*. What class of persons have you for neighbours? Retired cheesemongers, I suppose?"

"I assure you, you are quite mistaken," replied Geoffrey, coolly. "Next door, on our left, we have a General; next door, on our right, Palette, the well-known painter."

"Evidently a very mixed neighbourhood," was Lady Barrington's scornful reply.

"Society is very mixed now-a-days. I have met Palette at some good houses."

"He may go into society, but society does not come to him here," said her ladyship, obstinately.

In this uncompromising manner did she express her mingled commiseration and contempt for the folly which had led her daughter to provoke this social ostracism. She found fault with everything, asked Edith when they were alone the amount of

wages that she gave her cook, and elevated her eyebrows in amazement at the humble sum which she mentioned.

“You will simply be poisoned by such a creature!” was her cheerful comment.

Her manner at last became so intolerable, that Edith summoned courage to do battle with her.

“You have forgiven us, mamma, and you must let that forgiveness be sincere,” she said, firmly. “I will not allow Geoffrey to be exposed to this succession of hints and innuendoes. Poor fellow, he *is* poor, I know, but I accepted him with his poverty, and we must make the best of it. There are plenty in the world who have greater cause for complaint.”

Lady Barrington looked at her daughter in astonishment: this display of spirit was one more result of Geoffrey’s insidious teaching. {She faltered almost meekly, for like many overbearing women, she was soon cowed by a resolute opponent: “A thankless child is sharper than a serpent’s tooth.”

"I am not thankless. I merely wish to put our reconciliation on its proper footing," replied Edith pursuing her advantage. "The past is done with, grieving over it is useless."

But her demeanour grew less scornful after that protest of her daughter. She took her departure early. "It was a long drive," she said in a tone in which there was the slightest trace of sarcasm. Poor lady! She was thinking of Talbot Champion and his five thousand a-year.

Mr. Harwood came to dine with them the next day. He was a frequent visitor at their house; he had grown to take quite a paternal interest in the young couple, and was constantly showing them little acts of kindness. Edith had only to express the wish for a ride, and a horse for herself, and one for Geoffrey were sent round the next morning. It seemed as if his cynical nature softened and melted in the sunshine overspreading these young lives."

"Well, how did the old dragon behave herself?" he asked his host privately.

"In the most offensive manner!" replied Geoffrey, who was still smarting under his mother-in-law's ill-concealed contempt for his circumstances. "Found fault with everything: sneered at the neighbourhood, even at the dinner, so Edith informed me afterwards. In fact, her conduct couldn't have been more gross if she had been a low-bred woman."

"Rub off the thin veneer of refinement, and human nature shows itself beneath, common to all!" said Harwood in his usual sententious style. "Let passion appear in all its naked deformity, and where is the great difference between the peer and the peasant?"

"Even Edith got disgusted with it at last."

"She will never be different to her dying day. Lady Barrington is like the Bourbons, she learns nothing, and she forgets nothing. Her implacability springs from a narrow mind."

Mr. Harwood went from Elmore's house to his club. Percy Carrick was standing

in the centre of a group of eager listeners. He was evidently imparting some important information.

"I thought as much ; they are done for now," said one gentleman.

"Heard the news?" asked Percy, turning towards Mr. Harwood. "The Government has been defeated by an enormous majority!"

"Then they cannot have the effrontery to stay in any longer," said Harwood, gruffly.

"H—— wanted to resign a week ago, but he was restrained by his colleagues. Now they will be obliged to go," replied Carrick.

"Depend upon it, there will be an appeal to the country. They have been defeated on side issues only, and not on their general policy," said another speaker.

"And the voice of the country will return but one answer," said Harwood, in his sternest manner. "The Government, though numerically powerful, is intrinsically weak. H—— came into office with a large

majority. At first they carried all before them ; but now, at the end of two sessions, they are completely demoralised. Success in a few great measures has pushed them from their balance, and their faithful friends, the people, will give them the crowning blow of mercy."

" A general election will play the devil with us," said Carrick, musingly. " It is well enough for men like H——, who cannot count their wealth, but not for gentlemen like myself !"

" Especially when you reflect that, in the present state of affairs, you may lose your seat as well as your money," said Harwood, pleasantly.

Percy Carrick did not answer that sarcasm ; he was busy with his own thoughts. The prospects before him were not so pleasant ; the fall of his party from power meant a serious obstacle in the path of his success.

## CHAPTER II.

### A RELUCTANT CONSENT.

LADY BEATRICE had returned to town, betrothed to Cyril Meredith, with her father's consent. That consent had been difficult to obtain, and it was accompanied by hard conditions ; but it was better than absolute refusal. Her more resolute nature had triumphed over her father's.

"Have the fullest confidence in my faith, Cyril," she had said to him when they parted in the grounds of Cheverton. "I have promised to be your wife, and that promise I will keep. If I break it, it will be your faithlessness that will justify me. But we will not speak of this now," she said, quickly, perceiving that his brow



clouded at this. "Rely upon me to gain my father's consent. I will not hesitate to tell him that my happiness is staked upon it. I know him too well to think he will refuse me after that confession. Your love has come as a new revelation in my life, proving the existence of a deeper joy than I had ever imagined possible. I begin to fancy that my former foolish dreams were, after all, only undefined longings for that life which is sanctified by love. In that life, Cyril, I shall learn to hush the voice of former discontent, and know that my ambition is satisfied in watching and sympathising with yours."

He could not find fitting words with which to reply to that frank, almost pathetic, confession of her love. He took her hand, and pressed it eagerly to his lips, as he said, "Beatrice, I can only promise that my whole life shall be employed to repay this. I must leave you now, but your sweet face will go with me; you will smile on me like a bright-eyed Hope, pointing with inspiring finger to that golden

future in which our souls shall know no barrier, when I may come back and claim you for my wife."

Three days after Cyril's departure, she sought her father. Her heart beat quickly when she found herself alone with him, but the recollection of her promise sustained her.

"Papa, I have to communicate to you a very important secret," she said firmly.

"Indeed," said Lord Ravensworth smiling. His thoughts were wandering, and he did not pay that attention to his daughter's manner which might have given him a clue to the object of her visit.

"I am come to ask your consent to marry," she said simply.

The directness of this appeal recalled instantaneously her father's thoughts from the political direction in which they had been traversing. He looked at her in some perplexity.

"It is a laudable ambition, my dear Beatrice," he said with a faint smile. "But I am taken by surprise. I had not the

least idea of this. Who is the suitor? He has been very secret."

"The suitor is one to whom, I fear, nay, I am sure, you must object," she said, in as firm a voice as she could assume. "Not on account of his character and accomplishments, which extort praise from all, but for mere worldly reasons."

"My dear Beatrice, to whom is all this the prelude?" he asked excitedly.

"Cyril Meredith has proposed to me, and I have accepted him."

Had a thunderbolt fallen at Lord Ravensworth's feet, his countenance could not have exhibited greater perturbation. Twice he tried to speak, but failed to summon words that could sufficiently express his astonishment at this revelation. At last, he faltered out incredulously—"Meredith proposed to you, and you—you have accepted him?"

"It is true," replied Beatrice, a shade paler now. "I wish, for your sake, that he had those other advantages which would not render an offer of marriage from him so absurd in your eyes. But he has had

the audacity to overlook that consideration, and I have overlooked it too."

The old earl still stood silent, and Beatrice spoke in an impetuous tone.

"Oh, my father, do not refuse your consent. I am a wayward, romantic girl, perhaps, but I could not marry where I did not love, and Cyril Meredith is the only man I have ever cared for. He is noble in mind and accomplishments; what does it matter if his birth be humble: *that* does not make him less a gentleman. He is poor, but I shall have wealth enough for both. *We* were poor once, you have told me. My mother, whom you loved dearly, did not make that a bar to your wishes. Why should her daughter be less generous? I love him so dearly. Do not be cruel enough to separate us."

That reference to her mother had touched a tender chord in the old earl, but all the prejudices of his caste and station rose up in protest against this alliance.

"You are, as you acknowledge yourself, a wayward, romantic girl," he said kindly.

"But Beatrice, this marriage cannot be. It is impossible, utterly impossible."

"Oh, do not say that! Why should it be so?" she asked eagerly.

"Your beauty and accomplishments must find a fitter mate. That mate you must seek in your own sphere. Meredith has acted dishonourably in taking——"

"Stay, father," she said proudly. "Hear me, before you breathe a syllable of reproach against Cyril Meredith. He loved me, I knew," she continued with a softened look, "but he would never have revealed that love if he had not first read my heart. He is only too conscious of the social gulf that yawns between us."

"Argument is useless, Beatrice," replied her father sternly. "I will never give my consent."

"I will never marry another man," exclaimed his daughter firmly.

"That is a matter on which you can please yourself. I will never coerce you into marriage," said Ravensworth, who regarded this as one of the stereotyped

threats in which romantic girls indulge. "But I will exercise my paternal authority to the extent of forbidding you to marry this man."

Beatrice left her father's presence baffled but resolute. She tabled the subject at each fitting opportunity that offered, and she had the satisfaction of seeing him gradually relent, until one day on which she perceived that a very little persuasion would subdue him completely, she said in a pleading voice—"You love your foolish daughter, do you not, papa?"

"Of course, my child, I am only studying your welfare," was the answer.

"Then if you love me, you cannot condemn me to a life of unhappiness :—I repeat a life of unhappiness," she said, as her father gave an impatient "Phsaw!" at the phrase. "Can wealth and rank hush the discontent of the heart? Can I be happy amidst these gay scenes, while I am longing for the sound of one voice, the touch of one hand? How can I go back to Cheverton amidst all that reminds me of him, and that

happy hour in which I knew I was beloved?"

Lord Ravensworth turned away his face at this appeal.

"Am I in truth, so disobedient a daughter?" she resumed, in her low, musical voice, and taking her father's hand in her own. "Ah, forgive me! I wish for your sake that my nature were different, that I resembled others more in worldly thought and feeling. But I cannot change myself in aught. Life is so short for happiness, so long for misery. Will you condemn me to stand upon the shores of time, watching the water's slow retreat, hoping that as the sullen tide rolls up and down, it may yet lay some treasure at my weary feet? Ah, no! you cannot be so cruel, you will not let me reproach you with a life's unhappiness, let me say to you from the depths of a broken heart— 'Once it brought a treasure I dared not take, although earth could not hold its price. You see its worth more clearly now—too late! such treasures come not twice.' No second love can bring

into my eyes the happy light that died with the first, nor breathe new life into a heart long dead."

And after this appeal, Lord Ravensworth said, with a great effort—

"Since you will not be guided by me, choose your own destiny. I give my consent, but on this condition—you shall be betrothed privately for two years. If at the end of that period this foolish infatuation still usurps your reason, you are free to marry this Meredith."

So the next day, Lord Ravensworth despatched a very formal note to the objectionable wooer, informing him that, for reasons which must be obvious to a man of his discernment, his daughter's revelation had come upon him as a most unpleasant surprise, and ending by stating the conditions on which he gave his consent. Cyril opened it with a trembling eagerness that continued until he came to the last page, and then he forgave the manner of the letter for the sake of its matter; and the next morning he received a letter from Beatrice, which made ample amends for all.



They met again, after a long separation, on her return to town. Lord Ravensworth was civil, but excessively cold in his bearing towards his daughter's suitor ; he let him understand very plainly that he was only tolerated ; and Cyril, who was as proud as if he had been the descendant of a hundred earls, chafed under this treatment. Sometimes he felt so hurt that he could scarcely conceal his annoyance from Beatrice.

"Only two years, Cyril ; they will glide quickly," she said cheerfully to him one day, when she had perceived this feeling, "and then we can smile as victors."

"You will be true, indeed, if you can keep your faith to me in this house, where everything conspires to shake it," he said sadly.

"Do you think I am so weak ?" she asked, with a charming smile.

"Does it seem ungenerous to doubt sometimes ? Could we change positions, would you not distrust your own power ?"

"No, I should have too good an opinion of myself," she said gaily.

He smiled at her gaiety, and forgot for the moment everything, save the one supreme fact, that he adored passionately, and was loved in return by, this beautiful woman.

## CHAPTER III.

### BETROTHED.

CYRIL and his betrothed met more often at other houses than at her own. They moved in the same set, and they both felt less restraint when removed from Lord Ravensworth's chilling presence.

"Percy Carrick has just left me," said Beatrice to him one evening at the house of Mr. A——. "He is in great tribulation, poor fellow. He tells me that H—— has determined to appeal to the country, and he does not relish the idea of a fresh contest for his seat."

"Can a man of his philosophical temperament be so moved?"

"How severe you are upon him. What is the reason?"

"I cannot like Percy Carrick," replied Cyril. "He does not talk for five minutes without indulging in those machiavelian sentiments, which, I must own, disgust me. Cynicism is pardonable, perhaps, in worldly veterans, whose experiences have been of the saddest ; but his career has been one of success. It is not in a young heart that such weeds ought to flourish."

"I think you judge him harshly. Clever men often affect cynicism, you know."

"I have struggled harder against fate than he ; and yet I do not deny the existence of virtue and goodness, as he seems to do in every sentence. Life has been very smooth for him in comparison to what it is for many. There have been no obstacles in the way of his talents ; he has only had to exhibit them in order to get them recognised."

Beatrice was silent ; she was wondering whether Cyril entertained any jealousy of him on account of her friendship for him.

Once her father had said to her—"If you must marry a poor man, I would sooner have you choose Percy Carrick. He belongs to our world, and is on the high road to fame. He will win a coronet for himself by the time he is a middle-aged man." Was it possible that the similarity between the two in many respects, and the advantage of the one over the other in birth and social position, and the choice of a career in which worldly distinctions are showered upon the successful, had suggested to him the idea of a tacit rivalry between them? If so, her native delicacy and tact would have prompted her to suppress Percy's name more often. But the fact was, she took a great interest in him, first, because he was so old a friend ; and, secondly, because he had talent.

"This is not so enjoyable as Cheverton," she said, after a pause.

"That will ever be the dearest place on earth to me."

"And it is also doubly dear to me now," she said, with a happy smile.

"Still, studying your kind is not unpleasing."

"If Percy Carrick were here, he might join issue with you on that point."

"You seem to know Mr. Carrick's mind very intimately," said Cyril, suspiciously.

Beatrice blushed slightly at that retort. She felt that she had fallen into the habit of quoting him rather more often than was necessary, or perhaps quite intelligible to a lover.

"I have known him so many years, and I have been so frequently amused by his odd sayings," she said, apologetically. "He seems to have stood in the place of a brother, you know."

"How was it possible that he could avoid falling in love with you?" he asked, smiling.

"I am sure I cannot tell. He evidently has very bad taste!"

As she spoke thus, she remembered a time when Percy's manner revealed a tenderness that had rather alarmed her.

"When we are in love, we always think

every one ought to see with our eyes," said Cyril.

"Lovers are a very capricious, unreasonable race, no doubt."

He regarded her tenderly as he said, .

"Only when their love is not enough to give them faith."

They talked together for a little longer. The hard terms of their betrothal only made it possible for them to snatch these hurried conversations ; and then Cyril left her, saying in a low voice—

"I must depart now, or the world will begin to suspect the truth. But, from afar off, I shall watch the butterflies of the hour gathering round you."

"And you will see me shake them off, one by one," she replied.

He walked away, and was soon conversing with others ; but in whatever part of the saloon he was, his eyes wandered constantly in the direction of Beatrice. He saw guest after guest approach and talk with her—among the rest, Lord Warton. He had never exchanged a word with

him since their quarrel at Cheverton, although they met constantly—often sat opposite to each other at dinner parties. But Warton was in no love-making mood that night; he was absorbed too much in the political events that were going on outside.

“Have you seen the Elmores?” he asked, after he had duly deplored the crisis.

“I drove to their house to-day.”

“Somewhere in the wilds, I think Lady Barrington told me?”

“Not quite so bad as that,” said Beatrice, with a quiet smile.

“And they seem happy?” was Lord Warton’s next question.

“As far as I can judge, it would be impossible to be happier.”

“Ah! early days, of course,” said his lordship, sententiously. “She will find out her mistake in time. Nothing makes a woman more discontented than the world’s pity; and there is nothing left but pity for a woman who marries badly.”



Cyril Meredith passed by just in time to hear that remark.

“ Everything conspires to shake her faith in me,” he said angrily to himself, as he left the house.

## CHAPTER IV.

### MARKHAM'S REGRET.

CYRIL MEREDITH went from Mr. A——'s house to the "Criterion" club, one of the head-quarters of some of the best-known literary men, and the first actors of the day. Caleb Markham was in the smoking-room when he entered, entertaining a large circle with a humorous description of a new piece from which he had just come.

"The degradation of art was, in fact, complete," he said, in conclusion. "Every five minutes the comic man gave utterance to the following literary gem—'It will be all up with me,' and that brilliant remark was received every time with an admiring roar. It is scarcely too much to say that the piece

owed its success to this inspiration. "How do you do, Meredith," he said, to the new comer. "You have missed something."

"I can see I have from your description?"

"Why will managers insist upon perpetuating and encouraging a vicious taste," continued Markham. "The public can appreciate better things. Interest has not expired in such brilliant comedies as the "Rivals," or the "School for Scandal."

"I don't see much to complain of in actors or theatres. Degradation of art, indeed! What say the public? Their patronage does not slacken: they come crowding to the play, and pit and gallery are crammed. You get plenty of amusement for your money, and that satisfies most people," remarked a not very profound observer, who had listened to Markham with some impatience.

"Opinions will, no doubt, differ on such matters. True insight is not given to all men, nor accurate knowledge, nor quick perception. But by general consent the de-

terioration of the drama is manifest. How its ancient prestige may be recovered, it would be difficult to say. In the productions of the intellect we must be guided by authority, by men who from study and natural aptitude are the best judges of dramatic literature. The public may, as you assert, have plenty of amusement for their money, but some of it is of a very gross nature. Going to the theatre is like going to church : you are not responsible for the quality of the instruction you receive, nor is your attendance to be taken as a sign of your approval. The stage is a potent instrument for elevating or demoralizing the people."

• "In the golden days of the drama, when great actors trod the stage, the audience in the pit was of a totally different quality," added Meredith. "There art and literature were represented. It was the field of ideas, in which distinguished critics and wits and authors met to banquet on the intellectual feast before them. The movements of the actor were scanned with

intense eagerness. His utterance of the poet's glowing words, the wondrous expression of the face where contending passions strove for mastery, the glance of fire, the troubled movement in the muscles of the mouth, all combined to breathe life into the creations of the poet. And Lear and Richard and Hamlet moved before you in their habits as they lived."

Here Meredith paused, and Markham took up the conversation.

"The foul compost with which the stage is encrusted must be swept away," said he. "Banish from it those shameless women who expose their limbs to the gaze of the voluptuary. Why should the ears of our wives and daughters be afflicted by offensive dialogue and indecent gestures, why should the art of Terpsichore and the lyre of Apollo be subsidized to garnish these repulsive exhibitions? Banish also the buffoon, who, to make 'the unskilful laugh,' takes liberties with his audience, and traffics in obscenity, whose rôle is that of offen-

sive incident, vile slang, and shameless innuendo."

"And banish also the playwright, the pander who opens up to the gaze of the world the forbidden forms of vice and corruption," added Meredith. "Men who, unable to write or construct a play themselves, make up for the baldness of their own conceptions by pillaging those of their neighbours, and in modifying the original, produce an abortion. In the matted web of the sin and suffering that afflict the world, there are yet materials for the dramatist, nor need those amongst us despair who, with a true love of their art, seek only to edify, to interest, and to instruct."

Nobody present offered to add to the discussion, and Markham and Meredith rose to leave.

"It is early yet, Cyril. The evening has only just commenced with the sons of fashion. If you are not due at any more gatherings, come home with me for an hour or two. I have much to tell you. I promised to be back soon, for my little

queen has prepared a banquet, of which even you may deign to partake, although you dine off dishes prepared by a cook who gets more for upsetting your digestion, than a clever man receives for a book that is a perpetual mental feast !”

And with this whimsical speech, he locked his arm in that of his friend, and when they left the club, hailed a cab, and drove to Brixton.

Mabel was reading, but she put down her book at their entrance, and ran joyfully to greet her father. She started slightly on seeing Meredith.

“ Did you think I was going to play the truant, little Queen,” asked Caleb kindly.

“ No, I knew you too well,” she said, as she returned his fond kiss.

“ And I have brought this young son of fashion with me, as you perceive.”

“ He does not want a welcome from me, I suppose.”

“ Well, it is rather late in the day to begin that ceremony.”

So they sat down to the banquet, as

Markham called it. How many times had Cyril made one at this hospitable table ere he had gone into that other world.

"I said I had much to tell you," said Caleb, when he had risen from supper and was sending forth great clouds from his favourite meerschauum. "I am writing a great melodrama in five acts. What do you think of my audacity?"

"That it will be crowned with success," replied Meredith, smiling.

"Flatterer!" cried Markham. "It came about thus. You know Mason? Well! he came to me one evening at the club, and asked me to write a piece for him, a piece with plenty of incident. With my natural modesty, I declined at first. I told him I had not written for the stage for so long, that my hand was out at this kind of work. But he pooh-poohed my apologies, was profuse in his eulogy, and finally persuaded me to undertake it. He has offered me very advantageous terms, and as it is a windfall I did not expect, I shall invest it immediately."



"Have you commenced any of it yet?" asked Meredith.

"Yes. I have the plot clearly sketched out, and I have written it in detachments so to speak, as I have felt in the humour. Mabel, my darling, run and get me the manuscript. I will read Meredith the speech of the second heroine when she discovers the villainy of her lover. I think it will thrill him," he added, laughing.

Mabel complied with her father's request, and Caleb laid down his pipe, and standing on the hearth rug, and assuming a tragic tone, declaimed as follows: "So, sir, I have at last learned your true character. All the time that the world believed you to be my suitor, you were playing a part unparalleled in villainy. I can now understand the reason for the paltry pretexts with which you excused your absence from your betrothed. You left my side to poison the mind of that young girl, and ruin her for this world and the next. She has saved herself from sin—no thanks to you—and if she has as much spirit as she has virtue, she will

think you as much beneath her hate for the wrong you have done her, as I think you beneath my contempt for the insult you have offered me."

"There, sir!" exclaimed Caleb, flinging down the manuscript and resuming his pipe, "How do you think that would go, delivered by a first-rate actress?"

"I can hear the approving roar of the gods now," said Cyril.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Markham, pleased at his friend's verdict, for a very little praise delighted him. "I used to bring down the applause in some of these old pieces of mine."

"Ah, Markham, why did you not keep to writing for the stage? You might have made a name by now," said Meredith, earnestly.

"Because I was a fool," answered Markham, bitterly. "They say men who have a love for their art are sure to succeed. I begin to suspect I never had any real love for mine. I took to literature because it seemed to me a fine thing to see your name

in print; and I took to the least dignified branches, because I found the least hard work in them. I don't believe I ever had genius: I don't think I could have ever breathed into any work that Promethean spark which makes it live."

"You are only trying to justify your apathy now."

"Ah, my dear boy, don't let us think of what might have been!" replied Caleb, gravely. "It is the saddest phrase in the language, sadder even than its companion the 'may be.' For while the one heralds the birth of the hope that may be immortal, the other is the funeral dirge of the hope, for which there is no resurrection. There is nothing more mournful to a man of my age, than to look back on his life-pilgrimage and see, in the strong light which experience flings upon it, the rare and radiant flowers that his hand disdained to gather."

The tears were in Mabel's eyes, as he spoke thus gravely, and he saw them.

"I have had touches of compunction now and then," he said, drawing her to him,

fondly, "when I had none but myself to think of; but my regret for my Bohemian life has been the greatest since my little queen has grown into a woman; for I feel that I might have left her a name she could have been proud of; and now when I die men will remember Caleb Markham, if they remember him at all, as a mere worn-out literary hack."

## CHAPTER V.

### A DISCOVERY.

“CONGRATULATE me, Beatrice. I am returned by a majority of ten !”

Percy Carrick had called at Lord Ravensworth’s immediately on his return to town, to inform his old friends of the result of the election. H—— had made that appeal to the country which his poorer supporters had so dreaded, and the country was not answering satisfactorily.

She congratulated him warmly. She looked upon him almost as a brother.

“But I am afraid we shall find ourselves in a depressing minority,” said Percy. “The other side increases its score every day. Where there are three members to

be returned, the Government just manages to get in one. There is quite a panic in the political world. Some of the best men, who've sat in the house for years, have been ignominiously defeated."

"You are exceptionally fortunate, then," said Beatrice.

"Well, yes, considering I am, comparatively speaking, one of the younger members of the party; one of the 'will be some day' set. But I have had a narrow escape. Last time I was returned by a majority of four hundred and ten; so between that time and this two hundred of my old friends have come to the conclusion that Percy Carrick is unworthy of their confidence. I have disgusted two hundred individuals!"

"Two hundred enemies are more than I should care to make in private life," said Beatrice, smiling. "In political life it does not matter so much; when they have deprived you of your seat, their rancour ceases. A private enemy hates you to the death!"

"One enemy counterbalances many friends," replied Percy, in his calm way. "For your best friend is never so hearty in his friendship as your worst enemy in his hate."

Percy Carrick used to deliver some of the most cynical sentiments in the least cynical manner of any man. He uttered them very often with a most pleasant smile, which seemed to imply that he was giving you the result of his experiences, and that he did not expect you to be any more indignant over them than he was himself. There was no enthusiasm about the man, not even in his cynicism. After indulging in that reflection, he changed the subject into one that more directly interested his listener—he spoke of Meredith.

"His popularity still continues and grows, I find," he said.

"There is every reason why it should, when each work more fully displays his genius."

Beatrice could not conceal a slight emo-

tion at the mention of her betrothed. It did not escape the keen eyes, watching every expression. He spoke again in a studiously careless tone.

"I shall feel an interest in watching his career. The hill of fame he has climbed already. I want to see how he will turn that fame to account—in a worldly sense, I mean. The first thing he will do, I should fancy, is to look out for a rich wife who admires his genius."

"A very prudent proceeding!" said Beatrice, speaking rather quickly.

"Most prudent," returned Percy, in the same careless tone, but with his keen eyes still watching and noting every varying expression. "Mr. Meredith is a poet who finds romance pays in books, but he is also, I take it, a man of the world, and will marry for wealth, not love."

"It is false. You slander him," she exclaimed angrily. Prudence was thrown to the winds at that base insinuation. To admit the possibility of this would be to admit that his love for her was a pretence,



a cover for his own worldly aggrandizement.

A scarcely perceptible smile curled Percy's lip ; it was the self-satisfied smile of a man who feels that his opponent's indiscretion has revealed to him an important secret. The warmth of her manner, the angry light in her eyes, told him what she had desired to hide.

"You are defending his character from even suspicion with great zeal," he said calmly.

His manner told her that he guessed all. It would be better that she should confess the truth to him, lest he put a construction upon her silence hurtful to her pride.

"I defend him, because I am the one proper person to whom his defence should be entrusted," she said, firmly. "Cyril Meredith and I are betrothed. Our betrothal is for the present a secret, because my father has only given his consent on that condition. You will respect my confidence."

Percy Carrick was prepared to hear that

they were privately betrothed, but he could scarcely credit the last portion of her statement ; that Lord Ravensworth had given his consent on any terms. He had never liked Meredith, but from that moment he hated him ; hated him, because he recognised in him a rival in no way his superior in worldly advantages, who had triumphed over him. It was a hurt to his pride also, to think that he, Percy Carrick, the astute man of the world, had been defeated by a poetic dreamer ; for he could only believe that her wealth and position had attracted Cyril.

“ You must not ask me to congratulate you, Beatrice,” he said after a pause.

“ I ask no one for congratulations,” she answered haughtily.

“ Not because I would not see you happy ; you can believe that to no one would your happiness be more dear than to your old playmate,” said Percy in a grave voice. “ But because my opinion of you is so high, that I should wish your husband to be in every respect worthy of you ; because

a woman like you should not throw herself away upon a man who—”

“Cyril Meredith is in every respect my equal.”

“In mind and person not unworthy, perhaps, of even such a wife as you,” replied the cold schemer, with a tenderness in his voice that was assumed for a purpose, “but in all other points, *no*. There are other men who might adore you, Beatrice, and yet would cut their tongues out rather than utter the words which could induce you to stoop to their sphere,” he added, in a meaning tone.

“Percy Carrick, we have been friends from childhood, and it is my wish that our friendship should continue,” said Beatrice, speaking in a voice that was kind and grave. “But on this subject I can brook no dictation ; my father is the only one in the world who has a right to hold that language to me. As a gentleman you will respect the secret that I have betrayed to you—not,” she added proudly—“that I am ashamed to let the world know it, but be-

cause it is my father's will. As a friend, you will never, by open word or covert hint, attempt to depreciate Cyril Meredith in my eyes. Let that be the compact between us."

"And supposing that I should hear or discover anything about Mr. Meredith that might place his character in a new light, am I not to have the privilege of an old friend, and submit my information to your judgment?" he asked, in an almost humble tone.

"If you ever have any charge to prefer against him, prefer it to his face in my presence. I will be the judge, and give my decision, after I have heard both," answered Beatrice, calmly.

"I am afraid the plaintiff would stand a very poor chance with such a judge," said Percy, with a good-humoured smile. With his ready tact, he perceived that this was no time to sow the seeds of prejudice against his rival. He must wait for time to bring opportunity to him.

At that moment the door was thrown open, and Lord Ravensworth entered.

“How do you do, Percy? Glad to read last night that you were returned. But I am not sorry to find that there is a terrible slaughter in the ranks of your party. Ah, my dear fellow, you made a great mistake when you became a supporter of H——, you should have joined us. H——’s principles may flourish for a time; but they will not stand: there is no vitality in them. Our principles are the only true ones,” concluded his Lordship, impressively. “We shall be in power, sir, in a few days.”

“I am afraid you are too true a prophet,” said Percy, with a heavy heart.

Percy Carrick left Lord Ravensworth’s house more perturbed in spirit than was customary with a gentleman of his philosophical temperament. At every turn of the street he met with some acquaintance who had a bantering remark to make upon the forlorn state of his party. “Hang these neutral fools who always grin at the vanquished,” he thought to himself.

“Ah, Mr. Carrick, a majority of ten. Can I congratulate you on such a barren

triumph? It is a case for condolence when there are only ten men to turn the scale," cried the cheerful voice of Mr. Harwood. He was one of the "neutrals" too.

"Well, at any rate, I have fared better than many. They have not even spared the Cabinet."

"Hem," replied Mr. Harwood significantly. "You know the story we used to read at school about the king cutting off the tallest of the poppies before the slave who waited for an answer. *You* have been spared. I say no more. Good day to you."

Percy reached his chambers without more interruption, and communed with himself as was his wont. "Ravensworth was right. I was a fool to join the other side; they had been in too long when I came. In a country like this where the mass of the people are so apathetic in political matters, the tide is sure to keep turning. I have been a fool not to foresee this. I could have distinguished myself in opposition, and come in now with the conquerors.

They will last seven years if they last a day, and I shall be thirty-four then, even granting that they get turned out at the end of that period. I have played my cards badly."

In his present mood, the thought of Cyril Meredith's betrothal did not trouble him so much, but he still had leisure to remember it.

"What advantages such a wife would confer on me," he said, bitterly; "and to think that a fellow like Meredith who hasn't half my brains, should win her. Curse him. I could have forgiven Warton, because such a race was all in his favour, but *we* started on equal terms."

## CHAPTER VI.

### HAPPY DAYS.

CYRIL MEREDITH entered a few moments after Percy Carrick had left. Lord Ravensworth greeted him in his usual cold and constrained manner, and soon left the lovers alone. They talked about his new poem, which was to be given forth to the world in a few days.

“If it gives the public half the pleasure in print that it has afforded me in manuscript, it will be a grand success,” said Beatrice, proudly, adding, “What a joy it must be to write.”


“It is to the man who makes his art his mistress, and feels that he is no unworthy lover,” replied Cyril, warmly. “To feel



that you carry in your brain the embryo of a great thought : to watch its growth day by day, to dress and redress it in all the refinement and grace of language, as a parent exhausts the wardrobe on a favourite child, seeking for the one garment that harmonizes with, and heightens its beauty—that is the joy which consoles the poet, and the writer, for years of unappreciated efforts, for days and nights of weary toil.”

“Do you consider that you wrote better or worse before success?”

“A thousand times worse. When a man is writing, with the future still uncertain before him, whatever confidence he may have in his own genius, he cannot drive away that dark figure looming in the distance, on whose ugly forehead is inscribed in letters of fire—FAILURE. Reason as he may, he knows there have been thousands with hopes as lofty as his own, to whom a self-conscious voice has whispered—“*You too have genius,*” who have yet lived to see those hopes go down one by one into the grave of despair, and to whose exultant



whisper the cold world has never returned an echo." His voice had the deep ring of feeling in its tones; was he not describing to the woman who listened so eagerly, his own experiences?

"But after he has achieved success, he knows that the world will listen to him, and his powers are no longer cramped. A new ambition arises within him then—to attain the height to which the world's approval urges him. Before success, it is at the best only dreaming."

And Beatrice, as she listened to him with a glowing cheek and a proud smile, thought that she would not barter his love for the hand of an emperor. And after he had left her, she sat musing for a long time; went over in her memory all those happy days in Devonshire, when the love that neither had sought nor shunned nestled unbidden in their hearts; thought with a woman's rapture of giving, of all the advantages which her wealth would confer on him.

"I am of some use in the world, after

all ; when I am his wife, I shall feel something more than the social unit I was," she exclaimed, proudly to herself.

She was in the midst of the reverie when Edith Elmore was announced.

"The sparrow of Bayswater has come to visit the eagle of Belgravia !" she said, gaily.

"She is very welcome. And how is the other sparrow ?" asked Beatrice.

"Very well indeed. I left him in the nest," answered Edith, smiling.

"And it would be impertinence to ask if you are as happy as ever ?"

"Happier. We positively increase our store of happiness every day ! Mamma used to have a theory that you grew fonder of your husband after marriage. She applied it to cases in which you cared very little for him before. But it is a very sound one if it embraces our case."

"And you do not regret Mr. Champion in the least ?" said her friend.

"I am very glad I have escaped him. He was one of those butterfly kind of men

that I cannot endure. How angry mamma used to be when I told her that! By the way, I met him as I was driving to your house; he did not see me, though."

"Perhaps it was fortunate. The meeting might have been painful," suggested Beatrice.

"Perhaps," answered Edith, carelessly. Then she added with much dignity: "Take an experienced woman's advice, Beatrice—yes, I see you are laughing at the wife of a few months, but I don't care for that—never marry for anything but love."

"I shall profit by your advice, you may be sure."

Edith would have enlarged greatly on the congenial theme, but was interrupted by the entrance of Lord Ravensworth. He had never evinced his old cordiality to her since her marriage.

"Have you forgiven me yet for my audacity?" she asked him, saucily.

"I have nothing to forgive; you must ask that from others," he replied, evasively.

"Meaning mamma, of course," said

Edith, in her pretty, saucy way. "Well, she has forgiven me after a fashion. But you are more obdurate than she was."

"You are happy with your husband : you can dispense with the approbation of others," said Lord Ravensworth, coldly.

"Oh, I have no doubt you think parents a very ill-used race !"

"I am old-fashioned enough to think that they deserve more consideration from their children than they seem able to secure," replied Lord Ravensworth, with marked emphasis.

"Are you not afraid I shall corrupt your daughter ?" asked Edith.

"My daughter is, unfortunately, sufficiently strong-willed to do the work of corruption herself. She needs no tempter," said the old nobleman, in the same stern tone.

Edith looked puzzled at these severe words, but well-bred tact forbore her to pursue the subject ; and perceiving that her chance of a *tête-à-tête* with her friend was a small one, soon rose to leave, after

securing from her a promise to call on her the next day.

There had been a coldness between father and daughter even since Beatrice had wrung from him his reluctant consent to her betrothal. She had said to him once—

“Papa, how changed you are to me!”

And he had answered her very sternly, “It is your own fault that I am changed, Beatrice. You have annihilated all my hopes. You cannot expect me to smile over their grave. You have chosen between the father, whose love has been that of a lifetime, and a stranger who won your heart with a few romantic speeches. You have chosen deliberately, and you must abide by your choice.”

And to these stern words Beatrice had not dared to make any answer.

## CHAPTER VII.

### AN ADVENTURE.

THE last election battle had been fought, and had resulted in the defeat of the Government candidate. H—— had resigned, and his rival was forming a cabinet. Percy Carrick roused himself from his meditations which were not very pleasant, and sauntered into Bond Street. He had not proceeded far before his attention was arrested by an unusual spectacle.

A young lady of what newspaper reports designate a “remarkably prepossessing appearance” was standing engaged in an altercation with a cabman, if indeed, that could be termed an altercation in which the loudest-tongued of the two contending

parties has it all his own way. "These little games won't come over me," he was saying in a loud, brutal voice, "I knows your sort too well." The nucleus of a crowd had already been formed by the arrival of two small boys on the scene, who were enjoying the "row" with unfeigned delight. Seeing from the shrinking looks of the young lady that she was terribly alarmed at this publicity, Percy advanced to the rescue.

"What is the matter? Can I be of any assistance?" he said, politely raising his hat. The young girl turned to him gratefully, and answered in an agitated voice—"I have come a long distance, all the way from Brixton, and have been out some time. I must have been robbed of my purse: for on going to pay this man, who has driven me from Westminster, I found my pocket was empty. If he drives me home to my father, he will be paid there," she added in a trembling tone.

"Have nothing more to do with the



scoundrel," said Percy. "Here, fellow!" he called out to the cabman, "what's your fare?"

"Eighteenpence," replied the man in a surly voice.

"There it is. Be off with you," cried Percy, handing him the money; then turning to the young lady, he said, in a low voice—"Take my arm, and we can get away from these grinning idiots, and I can put you in the way to get home."

There was something inspiring and commanding in Percy's manner, and Mabel Markham—for it was she—suffered him to place her arm in his, and lead her away, without a protest. When they had got beyond observation of the small mob behind, he said—"And now you will allow me to lend you enough money to take you home, and you can send it me to the address on my card;" handing her a card.

"Thank you," said Mabel, blushing very much. "You are very kind. It seems dreadful, though, to have to accept it from a stranger. If I were sure that Mr. Mere-

dith, whose chambers are close here, was at home, I need not trouble you."

"You do not mean Mr. Cyril Meredith, in A— Street," he asked.

"The same : an old friend of papa's and my own," she answered in surprise.

"Then we ought to be acquainted. I know Mr. Meredith. I met him down at Lord Ravensworth's, in Devonshire, where, as you perhaps know, he was staying last year."

"Oh, yes ; I know all about his visit," answered Mabel, quickly.

"My name is Percy Carrick ; you may have heard him speak of me."

"No, I do not recollect the name."

"Well, never mind. He is sure not to be at home this time in the morning. In fact, I fancy I saw him pass me in a cab a short time ago. So, I am afraid you must allow me to be your banker," said Percy, suavely. He had invented that lie about the cab, for he did not relish the idea of parting with this pretty girl on so brief an acquaintance.

"Thank you. I shall have less hesitation, now that I—I——" faltered Mabel.

"Now that you know I am a respectable person," laughed Percy; then, seeing her more confused than ever, he added, "But you are quite right Miss—Miss *Incognita*, I suppose I must say—to be so prudent and distrustful."

"My name is Markham; my father's name is Caleb Markham;" said Mabel, simply.

"For many years a critic on the——?" asked Percy, naming a well-known journal.

"Yes. Do you know him, too?"

"Oh, it is evident that we ought to have been acquainted before this," said Percy Carrick, laughing. "I do not know your father personally, but very well by repute. I have done a little in the literary way myself."

"You have been very kind, and without your assistance I do not know how I should have got home," said Mabel. "I came down here in order to get some things at

Fortnum and Mason's for papa, who is unwell, and not able to leave the house."

"Then you must get them before you return," said Percy, taking out his purse.

"Oh no, I did not mean"—she stammered, suddenly aware that her last speech was rather equivocal. But Percy, taking out some money, left the rest in the purse, and pressed it into her hand, saying, "Of course you did not. But you may as well owe me two pounds as a few shillings. Your father can pay it me back, or, if he is not well enough to come out, perhaps I may presume to receive my debt in person?"

"Papa will be very pleased to see you, I am sure," said poor Mabel, with an awkward attempt at a smile. There was a supreme confidence, a habit of having his own way about this stranger, with which her worldly inexperience could not cope.

"Will you give me your address, then?" said the pertinacious Percy.

"Certainly," she replied. "I must tell it you, for they have taken my card-case as well as my purse : No. 2, Mortimer Road, Brixton Road."

"2, Mortimer Road, Brixton Road," repeated her new acquaintance, gravely. "I shall be sure to call, and if Mr. Markham does not like my visit, I need not call again."

By this time they had arrived at Fortnum and Mason's, and Percy took his leave.

"I shall amuse Meredith with our adventure, when I meet him," he said.

"Pray do. But I daresay I shall meet him as soon as you, for he is constantly at our house," cried Mabel, as she bowed to him.

"That's what I call an adventure, and one with a deuced pretty girl for the heroine," soliloquized Mr. Carrick, as he walked away. "An inexperienced, blushing little creature, but decidedly pretty. I will certainly call at Mortimer Road — what an

outlandish name ! And so Mr. Meredith is constantly at their house ! Humph ! My young friend is the attraction, I should say. How will Lady Beatrice like that, I wonder ?”

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

THE next morning the solitary domestic was sent from Mortimer Road to Percy Carrick's chambers with the two sovereigns folded inside a polite note from Caleb, in which he thanked him heartily for his kindness to Mabel, and regretted that his indisposition had made it impossible for him to express his gratitude in person.

"A very civil and a very prompt old gentleman," was Percy's reflection as he read the note. "I can now call without laying myself open to the suspicion of having come for my money. I have taken a fancy to that little girl : there is something artless and engaging about her that forms a

refreshing contrast to the worldly people I come across. Besides, I want to discover the nature of the intimacy between Cyril Meredith and this family." And a few days after, Percy Carrick drove over to Mortimer Road. He had prepared a very elaborate speech to account for his visit, but Caleb's hearty manner rendered this unnecessary. A man of Bohemian life and habits, he cared very little how an acquaintance was made.

"I am very happy to see you. You came gallantly, like the knights of old, to the rescue of a distressed damsel : I regret that your antagonist was so low in the social scale," he said, shaking him warmly by the hand, as if he had known him for years.

"There's not much opportunity for chivalry in this practical nineteenth century. The police magistrates have usurped the functions of knight-errantry ; but I am very pleased to have been able to render this trifling service to your daughter," answered Percy. He saw that this hearty old gen-



tleman would put no obstacle in the way of his visits. "And I felt it would be the height of discourtesy not to call and inquire if Miss Markham had felt any ill effects from what must have been to her an unpleasant adventure," he added suavely.

"Not in the least, not in the least," said Caleb. "But she will be here presently, and can answer for herself. Rather a peculiar coincidence, your being a friend of Meredith's; but the world is a small place, as I am continually in the habit of saying. I knew your name very well directly I heard it from my daughter. I reviewed your novel, and I am pleased to remember that I spoke of it in the highest terms."


At this moment Mabel entered the room, looking very pretty in a delightfully new muslin dress which she had assumed in honour of her visitor. Poor child! the arrival of Percy Carrick was quite an event in the dull monotony of her life: she saw so few people.

"I was very apprehensive that the

events of the other day might have affected your health, but I see very plainly that my fears have been unfounded," he said with a gallant bow.

Mabel was not used to compliments from men of the stamp of Percy, and she blushed slightly as she replied : " I have quite recovered from the shock, such as it was."

There was silence for a little time. Mabel felt rather shy in the presence of this self - possessed stranger, in whose appearance she recognised the traces of that nameless refinement which fashion stamps upon her sons. He beamed upon the prosaic life of Mortimer Road like a denizen of a brighter and far-off world : that world which rode splendid horses, drove in handsome equipages, and made time roll along on the fervid wheels of pleasure : that world of which she caught a glimpse occasionally when she went west of her own home. Cyril Meredith was the only man she had met hitherto who moved in that set, and he had been her idol so



long that she had scarcely noted whether that new life had wrought any change in him.

The silence was broken by Markham pulling out a cigar-case, and extending it to Percy.

"I hope you are not in a hurry for half an hour. Take a cigar. I can recommend these ; for I am a better judge of cigars than even novels, although I had the good taste to appreciate yours. Ha ! ha !" he said in his hearty manner.

"Will Miss Markham allow us to profane her presence so far ?"

"Oh, Miss Markham has no objection," replied Mabel, with a touch of her old natural ease. "We study comfort, not fashion, in Mortimer Road," she added, sarcastically.

"Then I can only say that true philosophy takes up its abode here," said Percy gaily ; and after that permission, he lighted his cigar without any hesitation.

"There is scarcely a visitor comes here who does not sacrifice to the god of tobacco,

whoever he may be. This is a Bohemian temple," said Caleb, laughing.

"I can vouch for one thing, that it has a charming priestess," replied Percy.

"Many of the worshippers are not of the same opinion, for they often show unmistakable signs of impatience at my presence, don't they, papa?" asked Mabel.

"Well, my dear, I fear there is some truth in your charge. Many of my friends are elderly men like myself," he continued, addressing Carrick, "and they don't retain the same fondness and reverence for the sex that they displayed in the days when Plaucus was Consul."

"Barbarians!" replied Percy, in a tone of mock indignation; "I have no doubt, Mr. Markham, that your friends are men of high mental attainments. But a man who cultivates his intellect at the expense of his gallantry, is, in my humble opinion, a sorry fellow."

Mabel laughed heartily at his denunciation. The ice had been broken, and she was beginning to lose the embarrassment

which this fashionable visitor had created at first. Certainly, when Percy Carrick exerted his powers of entertainment, no man could win more golden opinions. He was so easy and unaffected, and entered so thoroughly into the spirit of his surroundings. He made himself at home anywhere in a very few minutes. The great secret of his popularity was his capacity of adapting himself to circumstances. He felt that he was making a good impression on the Markhams, and that impression he was determined to strengthen. "Make friends where and of whom you can ; the most odd people can often render you a service," was one of his favourite maxims.

"Have you seen Meredith since your adventure ?" he asked presently.

"Yes ! he was here the day before yesterday."

"And you amused him considerably with our romantic story, I suppose ?"

"Yes, I related it in full," said Mabel, blushing slightly. That blush was caused by the recollection of the unfavourable

opinion of her new friend which Cyril had privately expressed.

"You knew him before he was such a great man?" said Percy to Caleb.

"Yes, sir, I assisted at the birth of his infant genius, little thinking that it would develope into such a giant as it has done," replied Caleb in his florid style.

"He is not a man of family, I believe?" pursued Percy.

"Well, no! I suppose he can trace his descent from old father Adam like the rest of us; but he is not what you aristocratic gentlemen call a man of family. That is to say—he had no ancestor in the middle ages who robbed and slaughtered his poorer neighbours."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Percy; "birth is, in many respects, a great humbug, certainly."

"Oh, do not say that. It must be glorious to have famous ancestors!" said Mabel quickly.

"This young lady is ambitious," thought Percy to himself; then he answered quietly,

"Well, it is plesaant if they are famous

for anything that deserves fame. But if many of them are like these pillaging, swash-bucklering scoundrels that your father alludes to, there is more reason to be ashamed than proud of them. None of my ascendants shed a great lustre on their present representative," he added, with a smile. "The most noted amongst them was a Master Marmaduke Carrick, who flourished in the reign of Charles the Second, and on his career, I grieve to say, one cannot dwell with pride."

Mabel was silent ; she did not understand this indifference to descent.

"I suppose Mr. Meredith has relatives who are proud of his success?" asked Percy after a pause, wishing to know as much about his antecedents as he could glean.

"Meredith has never been very communicative on family matters ; but I think I have heard him say that his only living relative is an aunt in Kent, who brought him up."

"Well, perhaps he is to be congratulated on their absence. Relatives are often very troublesome, especially to a man who has

gone into another sphere," replied Carrick, coolly.

"Your party will have to play a waiting game for some time, I fear," said Caleb, presently. "You will have plenty of time to give to literature, if you wish to follow up your success."

"No, I don't think I shall write any more," said Carrick; "I have neither the patience, nor sufficient love of the art to turn regular author. I wrote that book in the hope that it would give me a little reputation to start with in society, which it did."

"Perhaps you are right. If you wish to succeed in the political field, you must devote all your energies in that one direction. I have never found that Jacks-of-all-trades get on, as a class," said Caleb gravely, with a thought to his own wasted career.

"Papa has a play coming out next month, at the 'Queen's,' Mr. Carrick. You must come and see it the first night. I am sure it will be a success," said Mabel, after a pause.



"I shall be delighted."

He had now finished his cigar, and rose to go. As he did so, Mabel rose too, and moved nearer to the window, from which she could see the elegant phaeton and splendid horse waiting at the door. Percy Carrick saw her glance linger upon it with admiration, and he said—

"Are you fond of driving? Can you drive at all?"

"There is nothing I like better," answered Mabel, enthusiastically. "But papa always drives me—that is, when we do go out. We had a carriage yesterday, but the horse was one of those slow old creatures that go at a regulation trot. We have had two or three drives lately, for papa's rheumatism prevents him from walking, you know. But it must be delightful to drive such a splendid horse as that," she added, with another admiring glance into the street.

Percy Carrick was not a bad-hearted man where his own interests were not concerned. As long as selfishness did not

whisper to him how to rule his conduct, he would do a kindness for any one. He never passed a beggar without giving him relief. When some of his friends objected to this indiscriminate charity, he shrugged his shoulders, and answered contemptuously—

“It don’t matter to me whether the man is deserving or not. All I know is that his lot has been cast in very unpleasant places, and a sixpence or two may help to smooth it for a time.”

So, when he saw Mabel’s wistful gaze, he said, kindly—

“Let me leave it now for you and your father to take a drive. I can get a hansom to town.”

But neither would entertain this proposal from so recent an acquaintance. Percy, of course, divined the reason which lay at the bottom of the excuse faltered by Mabel.

“Well, perhaps when you know me better, you will not hesitate to lay yourself under so great an obligation,” he said, smilingly, as he turned to depart.

At that instant a knock was heard at the street door.

"That is Mr. Meredith," said Mabel, quickly. "You will wait and see him."

"I will wait to say how-do-you-do."

The greeting between the two men was not very cordial; the coldness was more marked on the side of Cyril, for it was one of Percy's maxims never to show your dislike to a man before other people, unless—he were a man of no importance.

"You have heard of our romance, Mr. Meredith?" he asked.

"Miss Markham gave me a full description of it," replied Cyril, coldly.

"Well! I must say *au revoir* now," said Percy. "Your charming society has made minutes seem seconds. I shall take the liberty of repeating my visit."

"We shall be very happy to see you when you can come so long a distance," said Mabel, cordially. She had taken a great fancy to their new acquaintance, in spite of Cyril's unfavourable opinion.

Mr. Carrick drove away with favourable

impressions also ; he soliloquized on his visit, as was his habit, and his reflections were as follow :—" I like that little girl very much ; if it were possible for me to ever have a serious touch of the love-fever, I should get it from her. But as love is out of the question, I shall try and become a great friend ; I feel quite a brotherly interest in her. And now, Mr. Meredith, I must see if I cannot find a jealous chord in the trusting temperament of your betrothed. That fellow's manner to me was positively insolent. I suppose he thought I was poaching on his preserves. There to-day and the day before yesterday ! If he only goes to see that jolly old Markham, he must be deucedly fond of him. At any rate, no man of the world would attribute his visits to *that* cause."

## CHAPTER IX.

### A COMPACT.

PERCY had taken some time to consider, not whether he should be acting honourably—that did not much matter to such a philosopher, but prudently, in revealing Lady Beatrice's secret to her baffled suitor, Warton. For a long while, the fear that she might one day learn his treachery kept him silent; but at length his desire for a companion in his hatred towards Cyril triumphed over his scruples, and he confided the secret to his friend at his own chambers.

“Swear by all your gods that you will keep eternal silence!” he had said.

"Tush! you know I am not a babbler," replied Warton impatiently. "What is it?"

"Some important information concerning Beatrice."

"Ah!" said Warton, turning pale, "it concerns that scoundrel Meredith too?"

"You have guessed right. It concerns them both."

"They are betrothed, I suppose?" cried Warton, pacing the room in his agitation.

"They are betrothed, but that is not the worst of it. You start at that; you think the climax is reached. No! the worst is that Ravensworth has given his consent."

"Ravensworth given his consent!" echoed Lord Warton blankly.

"Given his consent on very easy conditions, too. Their engagement is to be kept private for two years. At the end of that period they are free to marry."

"Is the man a fool, an idiot?" exclaimed Warton fiercely.

"Well, he would appear so to a great many persons."

"How did you become acquainted with this?"

"By my skill at cross-examination. I abused Mr. Meredith; that provoked Beatrice's indignation, which I perceived to be too real to proceed from any but one source. She saw that I perceived it, and confessed the truth."

"What is to be done? I could shoot him like a dog!" cried Warton.

"Possibly: but I have before explained to you the absurdity of that proposition."

"For Heaven's sake, Carrick, cease this affected calmness. I am a volcano!"

"The only way to touch Beatrice is to work upon her pride," said Percy.

"Why, she knows the fellow has sprung from the mud."

"Tush, I don't mean that sort of pride. She does not care whether the man's father was a count or a cow-feeder," replied Carrick, impatient at the interruption. "I mean the pride which is natural to every woman, the pride of being first in her lover's estimation. Now, if we can per-

suade Beatrice that her poetical suitor is inconstant, the thing is done."

"And how do you hope to accomplish that? The fellow is cunning enough: he knows the grand stake he is playing for. He will never be caught tripping."

"These romantic, high-souled, high-minded gentlemen are generally the first to expose themselves," replied Percy. "Would you be surprised to hear that I have already discovered a young lady who, to the best of my humble belief, divides with Beatrice the empire of Mr. Meredith's affections? Ha, ha! Warton! you look as puzzled as a village school-boy when he can't remember his task. I am telling you sober truth."

"To the devil with your riddles!" cried Warton angrily.

But Percy only laughed at his friend's rudeness, and narrated his meeting with Mabel Markham.

"And you think he loves this girl?" asked Warton, when he had concluded his story.



"I should not like to decide hastily upon so important a question ; but whether he loves her or not, his frequent visits are enough to provoke suspicion," replied Percy with a satirical smile. "The point to be recommended to our consideration is—what construction Beatrice may be persuaded to put upon this intimacy?"

"But you must have proof," interposed Warton, who was honourable in his revenge.

"Of course we must have proof. Beatrice has got brains and judgment : she is not likely to condemn a man she loves passionately on an unsupported accusation."

"If your suspicions are correct ; if time justifies the inference which you have drawn so hastily," said Warton, in his pompous style ; "if it becomes clear that Meredith is making her love minister to his own ambition, and this girl is the one who really possesses his heart, and whom, but for these selfish and personal considerations, he would make his wife, it is the duty of those who have Beatrice's welfare

most at heart—it is an advantage which a rival may fairly take—to save her from such a destiny.”

Here Warton paused for a moment, and Percy groaned inwardly, for he knew that this pause signified his friend was collecting materials for a fresh oration.

“Deadly as is my hatred towards this fellow, I must not supplant him by any devices that cannot be legitimately practised by an antagonist,” he resumed, in the same pompous tone. “I will have recourse to no deceitful magnifying of the real circumstances, no ingenious twisting and torturing an innocent fact till it is made to assume a most heinous appearance. If you can prove to your own satisfaction that he is playing the *rôle* of traitor, let our accusation be as direct as our evidence is damning! On these conditions, Carrick, I shall value your assistance as a personal favour.”

“My dear Warton, if I had not entertained very strong suspicions, I should not have indulged in the prospect of unmasking

Mr. Meredith's treachery," replied Percy, assuming a virtuous air. "My name is not so historical a one as your own, but I am too proud of it to give the world an opportunity of breathing on it a dishonouring suspicion."

"I know it; but hatred will sometimes warp a man's judgment," said Warton, apologetically.

"It shall not warp mine. Remember, I engage in this to serve you."

"Pardon me if I seemed to forget it," said Warton, almost humbly.

"Dull fool!" was Percy Carrick's first exclamation after his noble friend had gone, "As if he thought to impress me with that virtuous rhodomontade. A simpleton! without brains enough to hatch a plot himself, and proportionately scrupulous about the plots of those who serve him! *Serve him*, forsooth! As if a man like Percy Carrick would move across the room to serve an inflated self-sufficient fool like Viscount Warton, unless he served himself

at the same time ! If I did not hate Cyril Meredith myself, he might marry Beatrice to-morrow for all the Wartons in the world."

## CHAPTER X.

### SOWING THE SEEDS.

PERCY dined at Lord Ravensworth's on the evening of the day on which he and Warton had entered into their compact, and he resolved to lose no time in opening his plot against Cyril. The dinner party was a dull one, and he was glad to escape to the drawing-room. He made his way to Beatrice, who received him with her usual kindly smile of welcome, and said—

“You were sadly victimized at dinner, Percy. You could not have had neighbours less likely to appreciate the peculiar bent of your talents. You should have taken Sydney Smyth's advice on a similar occasion, and fired across the table. Your

conversational shot would have taken effect then."

"Pray do not pity me," said Percy lightly. "I have to talk so much in order to sustain my reputation of a man who *will* make his mark some day, that I am positively grateful when I can enjoy a little repose. It gives me time to collect my ideas."

"Well, talking comes very easily to you, at all events."

"When my reputation rests on a thoroughly solid basis, I shall not scatter my conversation about so liberally, I can assure you," resumed Percy. "There's G——, I remember the time when his voice used to overpower all the others at a dinner table. Everybody wanted him for his parties to let off fireworks. As soon as his fame was thoroughly established, he relapsed into comparative silence. His reputation does not suffer in the least. People come to hear him talk, and when they express their disappointment, somebody says in a solemn whisper, 'Ah, he wasn't in the vein to-night, but when he does

begin, it is a perfect avalanche of eloquence."

"But he cannot always act thus, or he would lose his reputation altogether."

"Oh, no. At judicious intervals he gives them a flash of the old fire."

"You should write a work, Percy, on these subjects, and entitle it, 'Rules for the guidance of the public conduct of ambitious young men.'"

"It would make the path to success too easy," replied the astute Percy.

The rooms were beginning to fill. He saw that he could not monopolise Beatrice much longer.

"Have you ever heard Mr. Meredith speak of the Markhams?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes. Why do you ask?" questioned Beatrice in her turn.

"Because I made their acquaintance the other day in a rather extraordinary manner;" and thereupon he told for the second time that day his adventure with Mabel.

"A remarkable coincidence, certainly,"

said Beatrice when he had finished : then she added, after a pause : “ The first time I heard of them was in the Row. Mr. Meredith was riding with us, and bowed to them. I remarked the beauty of the young lady, and he then told me who they were. He met them again at Marling just before you came down.”

“ Indeed !” was Percy’s brief comment. Then he said in a careless tone—

“ I drove over to see them yesterday, and found them at home.”

“ It was the beauty of Miss Markham that made you do that, I suppose ?”

“ Scarcely. I think curiosity was my chief reason : a want of other occupation might also have had something to do with it. I was rather curious, too, to see Markham : he gave me a splendid review, and I was glad to express my gratitude.”

“ And did you come away favourably impressed with the daughter ?”

“ She is a very charming girl ; unsophisticated, seen nothing of the world, but still——”



"Take care that you do not lose your heart, Percy!"

"I shall never ruin my prospects by an imprudent marriage," he replied gravely.

Beatrice coloured. "I must ask your pardon for having offered such an affront to your worldly wisdom as to suppose such a thing possible!"

"Besides," continued Percy, in a low, meaning voice, "my heart has no room for a second attachment. Love's shafts wound too deeply for a man to purposely place himself where he may be hit."

There was a long silence after that diplomatic speech. Percy broke it by saying—

"As I was leaving their house, I met Mr. Meredith."

"He often visits them, I believe," said Beatrice, in a tranquil tone.

"Very often: so at least, Miss Markham told me. They seem to have been his oldest friends; can trace every step of his career from obscurity to fame."

But her manner did not betray any

great interest in his information ; so he soon vacated his place to others who were waiting eagerly for his departure. As he reached the hall, Cyril Meredith was just entering, and Percy said to him—

“ Good evening, Mr. Meredith. We seem fated to meet at every turn of life.”

“ We meet, because our world is so small ;” said Cyril, coldly.

“ Yes, here.—But yesterday we met in a different world.”

“ True !” said Cyril ; then he added abruptly, “ You are leaving early.”

“ Yes, I have to put in an appearance at several places. Good-night.”

After bidding him good-night, Percy hurried to Lord Warton’s house, where there was a great political gathering. His arrival was hailed with signs of satisfaction.

“ What we want is a definite programme,” exclaimed one of the most influential men of the party. “ Carrick, can you sketch one for us ?”

And thus exhorted, Percy sketched, with his fluent and incisive eloquence, the line

of action which he considered ought to be taken in the present crisis. They all listened with marked attention, and although there were many dissentients from his opinion, the general murmur of applause that ran through the circle as he concluded testified to their admiration of the ability with which he had stated it.

"Monstrously clever fellow, Carrick! He'll be premier one of these days," whispered the influential man who had first spoken to his friend.

## CHAPTER XI.

### A SUDDEN SUMMONS.

“Do not forget to-morrow night at the ‘Queen’s,’” said Mabel, as Percy rose to leave at the conclusion of a visit he had paid the day before the production of Markham’s new piece. “You must come and applaud enough for twenty.”

He had become a frequent visitor at Mortimer Road. Both Caleb and his daughter considered him a most agreeable companion, and were inclined to attribute Cyril’s unfavourable opinion of him to prejudice. And there was something about this inexperienced girl that attracted Percy. He had steeled his heart against love, but he took in her an almost brotherly interest. Mabel

was in no danger either : Cyril Meredith was still her idol.

“Do you feel at all nervous at the ordeal?” asked Percy, turning to Caleb.

“I think not. I feel sure that the situations are strong enough to make the play go,” replied Markham. “I remember I was in a terrible fright when my first piece was played. At first, I thought I wouldn’t go till the second night, when my fate would be known for certain ; but I soon found I hadn’t the self-control to keep away. So in I went—I was only twenty, with rather a sneaking feeling, as if all the people were pointing me out as the author. The farce was played, and I was wishing it had been double the length, that the fatal moment might have been delayed. Well, sir, the curtain drew up, and I was hot and cold by turns, when I heard the first speaker open his mouth. I cannot explain to you the mental and moral bewilderment of a young fellow when he sees the whole house listening in profound silence to his own words. Then, presently, I heard a roar of applause

at some patriotic sentiment that had tickled the gallery, and after that. I couldn't see a soul. I was in a dream till the piece ended amidst tremendous plaudits. I was in a dream when I walked on the stage with the manager, and bowed my acknowledgments, and I don't think I was awake for a week after."

"Well, we parliamentary gentlemen experience that feeling," said Percy.

"I am sure I should never be nervous on the stage. I should be so absorbed in my part—in the speech I was delivering, that I should never see the audience!" cried Mabel.

But Percy shook his head gently as he said—

"Facing an audience is a big thing."

"Ah! you think I should be nervous, because I am not a very self-possessed person in private," replied Mabel. "But on the stage I know I should be quite at home."

"Well, I hope you never will be at home, then."

"What an objection all men have to the stage."

"I should be sorry to see a girl in whom I took any interest there," was Percy's answer.

She thought that they were nearly the same words that Cyril had used to her.

"I should like to play the heroine in papa's piece to-morrow night," continued Mabel.

"Why? From your sympathy with the character, or the love of admiration?" asked Percy.

"Oh! from both, I suppose," she replied, blushing a little.

"Because, if your theatrical ambition only arises from the love of admiration, or the love of excitement, I should not judge that you possessed that divine afflatus which would give you the mantle of Siddons or O'Neill."

"Thank you, you are very complimentary," answered Mabel, with a mock politeness.

"Well, I will say no more, in case I

offend you beyond the power of forgiveness."

"Good-bye, then, till to-morrow night. You will come into our box?"

"I will be there. And if the audience is of my opinion, it will be the success of the season;" and shaking hands with Mabel and her father, Mr. Carrick drove from the house.

His plot against Meredith was proceeding very slowly. He soon discovered, unfortunately for the success of his scheme, that the nature of Beatrice was not at all suspicious; she was apt to put a charitable construction on everything. But, still, Percy flattered himself that his hints and innuendoes were beginning to take some root, even in such an unfavourable soil. He judged from small, and to less keen observers, imperceptible signs, that Beatrice had at last begun to question whether Cyril's frequent visits to the Markhams were quite fair to his betrothed. Once she had remarked on his great friendship for them, and he had replied—



"Yes ; I go there very often. With the exception of your own, there is no society I prefer to that of Caleb Markham. He has such a fund of humour, and is so original and quaint in his conversation. I feel I am at an intellectual banquet when I am with him."

There was such warmth and sincerity in his manner, as he spoke thus of his old friend, that Beatrice for the time felt almost ashamed of the suspicion which she had allowed to ruffle the pure current of her faith. But, by degrees, Percy's insidious hints brought it back. He managed so cleverly that he left an impression without the least appearance of effort ; until you scrutinized very closely, you could hardly trace back the impression to him. And Cyril, perfectly unconscious of this suspicion of his betrothed, talked unreservedly of Caleb and his daughter. Knowing so well his own feelings for Mabel, he never thought of misconception by others.

He had arranged to give a supper at his own rooms to Markham, after the conclusion

of the piece. The guests he had invited to do honour to his old friend were men in the literary and dramatic professions, and, at Caleb's request, he had asked Carrick. They were all four together in a box when the curtain drew up; Markham, however, made frequent visits to different parts of the house, to confer with, and receive congratulations from, his various friends.

"The piece has been, so far, a decided success," said Percy, just before the commencement of the last act. "We shall now reach the climax—the public unmasking of the villain. Strange that that which secures such applause on the stage should occur so seldom in real life. There, villainy generally goes unscathed."

This was one of those shallow utterances, his frequent indulgence in which had disgusted Meredith at the beginning of his acquaintance with Percy. He said, coldly, in answer—

"Even if your theory were correct, which I deny, it would scarcely be conducive to public morality to air it on the stage; un-

less you wish to give men and women an incentive to vice."

"Nobody expects to see life truly represented on the stage," was Percy's answer.

"At any rate, I should not advise any man, with a tendency to criminal pursuits, to rely upon your theory of escaping detection."

"It is only bunglers who are discovered," replied Percy, obstinately.

At this moment the curtain drew up for the last act, and all eyes were bent towards the scene.

The play was founded on one of those incidents in human life which come within the experience of many. It was well-constructed, and the dialogue more than usually effective. The characters were drawn with much dramatic skill, and the principal actress gave such a pathetic rendering of the heroine, that, on the conclusion, the rapturous plaudits of the audience gave assurance of a great success.

At the usual call, the actors re-appeared before the curtain, and there were loud

cries for the author. Markham, looking flushed and excited, was led on by the manager, and bowed his acknowledgments.

"How proud papa must feel now," cried Mabel, enthusiastically.

"You would like to be in his place, I suppose," said Percy, smiling.

"I should cry with delight," replied Mabel, flushing hotly at the thought.

"I have come to the conclusion that you ought to have been a man."

"I have often thought the same myself."

"Then you could have acted or written, or done any thing you liked."

Markham entered the box just as Mabel was going to answer.

"Now my little queen, I must take you home."

"I am quite ready, papa dear," she said, as Percy put on her shawl.

"I shall take Mabel home, and be back to your chambers in less than an hour, Cyril," said Markham, as they entered a cab, and drove rapidly away.

When they arrived home, Caleb went

into the dining-room with her, and his heart smote him at the thought of leaving her to her solitary supper. "I think we ought to have celebrated my triumph here, my pet," he said, tenderly. "But I never gave it a thought when Cyril spoke to me about it, and I did not like to disappoint him afterwards."

"You dear, kind-hearted father," said Mabel, fondly putting her arms round his neck. "I shall not be lonely. I am only too proud to think you are going."

"God bless you, my own little queen," he said, as he kissed her. Then, taking her face between his hands, he said, looking in it with a great love beaming in his eyes, "You have been the angel of my hearth, my darling, ever since your dear mother died. Caleb Markham's lot would have been a weary one indeed, if he had not known there was this bright little fairy waiting to cast a gleam of sunlight on the old, humble home. I have had ups and downs, my child, but in my darkest hours I have had a ray of comfort. I knew that

there was one dear life bound up with mine, and that thought gave me courage. Good night, my pet;" and with that fond kiss on his lips, Caleb drove back to Meredith's chambers.

There was a general chorus of congratulations as he entered the room.

"It is scarcely fair for you to come back after so long an absence," said a well-known dramatic author, in a good-humoured tone. "You will put us all into the shade."

"I don't think so," rejoined another of the party. "Each man runs in his own groove; the different branches of dramatic art, so varied in subject and treatment, will ever prevent us clashing. I hope the new piece will give the stage a fillip."

"I never yet envied any man his success, nor do I think I have the least spark of jealousy in my nature. I am delighted to see so many old faces here to-night, and am sure you will appreciate the hospitality of our host," was Markham's reply.

Percy Carrick had scarcely a bowing acquaintance with any of the guests, but

he was not a man who would long remain a stranger anywhere. His incisive and *àpropos* remarks, with his reputation in letters, and his success in Parliament, soon secured him attention.

"Are you writing anything now?" asked A——, the great novelist.

"No; I take as great a delight as ever in observing men and manners: but I do not intend to describe them any more. I leave that to more able pens."

"From what I remember of your first work I should think that was needless modesty. There is plenty of room for talent in our world."

"Speaking indisposes you for writing I find."

"Possibly. I have no experience of oratory," said A——, smiling.

The night was now far advanced, and the feast drawing to a close.

The talk was lively and vivacious, sallies of wit and humour flashed from the tongue, while now and again peals of hearty laughter echoed through the rooms. The

guests were in that mood of mirth and gaiety in which the worldly mask that hides men's souls from the scrutiny of their fellows becomes transparent ; when subterfuge and equivocation are as dross, and the real man, stained or spotless as he may be, stands revealed to the beholder.

Markham was in his usual good spirits, and his gay and frank manner won the esteem of the guests. Conversing with Meredith on many incidents of their early life, his countenance suddenly fell ; recovering himself for a moment, he fixed on his friend an earnest, imploring look, and said, in a faltering tone, " Cyril, you'll not forget your promise ?" then, lowering his voice, he added : " My little queen ! I've been thinking of her all the night."

Moved by this touching appeal, Cyril grasped him warmly by the hand, and fixed on him an intense look of affectionate regard. He saw with clearest eyes the troubled soul of his friend, and in that speechless moment, the answer was given in a glance more eloquent than words.



"You're a true friend," exclaimed Markham, somewhat reassured : " your promise lifted a great load from my heart ;" adding, after a pause, " I don't feel well, and should like to get home soon, but I don't wish to mar the enjoyment of the evening, or hurry my friends in the least."

Touched by these words, Meredith instantly rose, while the buzz of conversation melted away into silence. " Gentlemen," he said, " in no cold or formal spirit do I rise at this moment to propose to you the toast of the evening. It is to me a labour of love ; an offering to the memory of a sacred friendship ; a long standing debt of warm affection and unqualified esteem ; a grateful tribute to sterling worth and honest endeavour. Caleb Markham is known to all present as a man of great and varied talents. There is scarcely a branch of literature which his polished and facile pen has not enriched. To many here he is known in private life, where you have seen him surrounded by those home influences which bring out in bold relief the tenderest

and finest traits in a man's character. We know from his writings and conversations that our friend is a man endowed with rare gifts ; but I, and many who are listening to me to-night, know something more ; that he is a man of fine sympathies, and a noble heart."

The frank speech and manly tone of Meredith roused the feeling of his audience ; and a sudden burst of applause greeted his words. On silence being restored, he continued :—

"When I have said this, I feel that his character is revealed ; eulogy is vain ; nor can the eloquence of the greatest orator claim for him more reverence and esteem than is challenged by these simple words. I feel that this language is held most appropriately by one who has enjoyed for so long a time the privilege of his friendship, who owes to his advice and encouragement his choice of a career in which ambition has been fairly satisfied, and I trust, gentlemen, that you will all drink the health of Caleb

Markham with the same heartiness that I do."

There was much enthusiasm at the conclusion of this speech, and when the congratulations had subsided, Caleb rose to reply. His face was very flushed, and he seemed labouring under great excitement.

"Gentlemen," he said in a low voice. There was profound silence, but no word followed the first. A deadly ashen hue crept over his face, and he fell heavily back in his chair.

"Good heavens ! It is a fit," exclaimed Meredith.

Percy Carrick had rushed up and placed his hand on his heart.

"Send for a doctor directly," he said, in a low voice. "But I am afraid it is too late : the heart has ceased to beat."

Percy Carrick was right. The summons that Caleb Markham had so dreaded had come at last : had come in the midst of triumph and festivity, with his friends' hearty congratulations ringing in his ears ; in the midst of all that told of strong and

vigorous life: had come to call him to that far-off land to which he would have gone so cheerfully and hopefully, but for the thought of the beloved child whom his death would leave alone in the world.

## CHAPTER XII.

### AN EXPLANATION.

IT was with a heavy heart that Cyril went to break the sad news to Mabel. He had to wait some time before the servant was sufficiently roused to answer his knock.

"Tell your mistress that I must speak with her directly," he said.

"Oh, sir! is anything wrong with master?" questioned the girl in a frightened tone. Everybody who came within the sphere of Caleb Markham's genial influence loved him.

"Hush!" he said quickly. "There is something. But do not let Miss Mabel know that till I see her."

In a few seconds almost, Mabel came down with anxious and terrified looks.

"Something dreadful has happened to papa. Am I to expect the worst?" she asked impetuously.

Cyril had steeled himself to answer this question, but the awful despair in that voice unmanned him. He turned his face away, and said falteringly,

"Mabel, I wish I knew how to soften the blow to you."

She did not cry or faint at that announcement, as many girls would have done. She stood with a stony, rigid expression on her features, as if her grief disdained the weak consolation of tears. Cyril went up to where she stood, and took her hand. It was as cold as ice.

"He had expected it, Mabel, although he never told you," he said, presently. It seemed a mockery to utter any words of consolation. Such intense grief must find its own cure.

And then at length words came. "My darling father that I said good-bye to only

a few hours ago : his last thought was for me when he left this house ; he was telling me how dear I was to him, how happy I had made his home. Let me go to him at once!" she cried, with an impetuous movement towards the door. But Cyril restrained her.

"They are bringing him here, dear;" he said gently. "You shall see him soon."

She suffered him to lead her to the couch, and there, burying her head in her hands, tears came at length to her relief, and she sobbed violently.

Percy Carrick accompanied the men who bore Caleb Markham back to the home which he had left a few hours ago in the full possession of vigorous life. Mabel sat alone with her dead father, and Percy offered to keep Cyril company in the drawing-room ; for it was impossible to leave Mabel and the terror-stricken servant alone in the house.

They sat in silence for a long time, and then Cyril said, in an impressive voice—

"Mr. Carrick, I have a question to put to you."

"I am perfectly willing to answer it," replied Percy. He guessed its nature.

"Caleb Markham's death has left me his daughter's sole protector," said Cyril, gravely. "I should be undeserving the confidence which my dead friend placed in me, if I hesitated to speak plainly when I saw the semblance of danger threatening my charge."

"Unquestionably," replied Percy, in an equally impressive voice.

"I converse with you as man of the world with man of the world," resumed Cyril. "My poor friend was very unsuspecting. Although he had the advantage of me in years, he had not witnessed so much of the bad, or, I will say, imperfect side of human nature as I have. He never considered it necessary to inquire of himself, for example, the reason of your constant visits here. You will see in that omission the unworldliness I mention."



"Yes, I grant it might appear unworldly," assented Percy.

Cyril continued, after that admission,—

"You made the acquaintance of Mabel Markham in a remarkable manner. Few other men would have built a friendship upon the slight foundation of that adventure. You did. My poor friend might have thought your visits were paid to himself, or he might not have thought about it at all. *I* cannot be so charitable."

Here Cyril paused for a reply. But Percy made no sign, and he said—

"As Mabel Markham's guardian I have a right to ask you : what construction am I to put upon your visits at her house ?"

After a slight pause, Percy replied, in his usual self-possessed manner,—

"I am not in the least hurt or surprised at your question, Mr. Meredith. It is one that the position in which your friend's death has placed you gives you a right to put. Nor is it a matter of surprise that you, a man of the world, should think it suspicious that I, a man moving in a totally

different sphere, should leave it to cultivate a friendship with persons in the position of Caleb Markham and his daughter. So far, have I met you frankly?"

"So far, you could not have been more frank."

"When a man in my position cultivates the acquaintance of a girl in the position of Mabel Markham, I am aware that the world, with its usual charitable eagerness, puts one—and that the worst—construction upon his proceeding. Now, I trust to remove from your mind—you being a man of the world, but also a man possessing finer discrimination than the majority of the shallow fools who set themselves up as judges of their neighbour's conduct—the suspicion which at present you share with them."

Here Percy paused, and Cyril answered gravely—

"I shall be pleased to have it removed."

Percy continued—"I was attracted by Mabel Markham's artlessness and pleasing manners; also, perhaps, by her good looks.

In an idle moment, I determined to renew the acquaintance. I came here ; your friend's unworldliness put no obstacle in my way. I soon found that Mabel was not a woman I should ever fall in love with, but a woman for whom I conceived a wonderful friendship and esteem. I have never had any near relative, except, perhaps, my childish companion Beatrice Neville, for whom I could entertain an affection that was perfectly free from lover-like warmth ; but I felt that could I have enjoyed the companionship of a sister, Mabel Markham was the one girl whom I would have chosen for that relation. And I would still wish to be her friend—she cannot have too many now, in her desolate condition,—to watch over her in a world that is still full of dangers and temptations to one so beautiful and inexperienced. It is for you, as her guardian, to say whether I may retain that privilege ; after you have first put it to yourself, as a man of that discrimination for which I give you credit, if the world is right or wrong in denying

the possibility of a pure friendship between men and women."

There was a dignity and frankness in Percy Carrick's explanation that could scarcely fail to make a favourable impression on his listener. It seemed plausible enough to Cyril, who could not know that his real motive in first making the acquaintance of the Markhams had been to gather some information which he might impart to Beatrice Neville to his disadvantage. Nor did he guess how this conversation, dictated by the best and purest motives, would be distorted to her until it was made to bear a sinister meaning.

"I believe such friendship is possible," said Cyril, gravely.

"Undoubtedly," replied Carrick. Then he added, with a cold smile, "The *world*, the world of shallow judges, might be disposed to put a harsh construction on *your* friendship."

"Mine!" said Cyril, starting. "I have known Mabel from a child."

Percy shrugged his shoulders. "That would be no defence, I fear."

"You are right, Mr. Carrick," resumed Cyril, after a pause. "The world is often harsh in its judgments; but then there is this excuse, that it has had to deal with some great criminals. If you tell me, upon your honour as a man and a gentleman, that you mean no wrong to Mabel Markham, be friends still, if she wishes it."

"I swear it," said Percy, fervently, and he swore truly.

"For if I knew that any man had been dastard enough to wrong that poor, heart-broken child, who is now kneeling by her dead father's side, I would not answer for the consequences if I met him face to face."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### AN UNEXPECTED COMPANION.

CALEB MARKHAM had not left his daughter in poverty. His insurance, and the money he had saved, for he had lived carefully for years, in view of this event, could be invested to secure her a moderate competence. Two days after he had been borne to his last resting-place, Mabel moved to lodgings which Cyril had secured for her at Kensington. He wished to place her under the care of some respectable family, whose society might take off the feeling of her great loneliness ; but she would not hear of this at present. She preferred to surrender herself to the control of her poignant grief.

Cyril had written to his aunt, informing

her of the death of his old friend, and in a few days he received a letter, whose contents surprised him very much. "I have heard, with great regret, of the death of Caleb Markham and the desolate condition of his daughter," wrote Ruth Meredith. "I have led a lonely life for years, and I know full well the anguish of loneliness. It has occurred to me, that if I were to come up to London, which I may as well do, since there is nothing stronger than habit that binds me to this place, we could make each other's lives less solitary. Will you speak to Miss Markham about it, and see whether she would care to have an old woman for companion. We need not thrust our society upon each other, if we lived in the same house, but it would be pleasant to both to know that society could be had immediately, when either wished for it. There is no necessity for anyone to be made acquainted with my relationship to you; for that matter, I could take another name. I will obey your wish in this respect: be assured of one thing, that I do not wish

to be in any way an impediment to your worldly progress."

It seemed to Cyril that this would be the very best guardianship for Mabel. He went over to Kensington immediately to see whether she would accept Ruth's proposition. He found the poor girl seated in her usual attitude of dejection, with her hands clasped before her.

"I wrote to my aunt telling her of your lonely position, and I received a letter from her just now, in which she proposes that you and she should live together," he said kindly.

"It is very good of her, but I fear I should be a dull companion."

"My aunt is not of the age that would require a very lively one."

"But I am afraid you have suggested this to her?"

"I assure you I have not. The proposition was entirely voluntary."

"If she is not coming from a dull life to one that is worse, I should be very grateful to accept her offer," replied Mabel. "I



could not go amongst strangers," she added tearfully, "but I could not look upon *your* aunt in that light."

"I will write and tell her your decision; or, perhaps, you had better do so."

"Certainly," said Mabel. "It will open the friendship without delay."

So Mabel sent to her a very graceful note, dwelling on the gratitude with which she accepted Miss Meredith's kind proposition, and hinting that for the present she feared she would find her a very dull companion. This letter brought back a short but concise answer from Ruth.

"My dear Mabel, you see that I begin our friendship at once," wrote this extraordinary woman. "I am truly glad that you have perceived the benefit to be derived from the arrangement that I proposed. I shall be able to start from here in a week. Cyril will meet me and bring me to you, and I trust that Caleb Markham's daughter will be able to find a true and lasting friend in Ruth Meredith." This was all that the letter contained.

At the end of the time which she had given herself for preparation, Ruth came up to London, Cyril met her at the station, and took her to Mabel's lodgings.

In spite of the grief to which she had surrendered herself, Mabel still looked very beautiful. She felt a little nervous at the first meeting with her new friend, but her nervousness did not sit ungracefully upon her. Ruth kissed her on either cheek.

"A lonely old woman and a lonely young one. We ought to be friends, my dear," she said.

"I feel no doubt on that point," answered Mabel with a pretty smile.

"My appearance is not very prepossessing, perhaps," resumed Ruth, in as pleasant a manner as her natural reserve permitted her to assume. "When a woman has had great sorrows gnawing at her heart for thirty years, she cannot expect to retain upon her face the happiness of her youth. But I trust you will find a true heart under this grim exterior."

All the years that Cyril had lived with

his aunt, he had never heard such a speech from her. Was it the loneliness and beauty of Mabel Markham that had softened the granite in her nature ? When Mabel took her new friend to remove her travelling things, Cyril left : he thought the two women would become acquainted sooner in his absence. After dinner, Ruth talked of Caleb.

“ But perhaps it is a subject that you cannot bear to discuss yet, dear ? ” she said kindly.

“ Oh, no. I love to talk about him, ” replied Mabel quickly.

“ And he told you that you had no relatives living ? ”

“ Yes. I knew that when he died I should be alone in the world. ”

“ But he had brothers or sisters, surely ? ” questioned Ruth.

“ He had, but their fate is enshrouded in mystery, ” replied Mabel ; and then she related to her listener the same story which her father had told to Cyril at Marling.

“ Did he ever visit the old farm ? ”

asked Ruth, at the conclusion of the narrative.

“Only once within my recollection. He might have gone before.”

“And the place was occupied by strangers, I suppose?”

Mabel answered in the affirmative.

“And it is thus that a family is scattered,” said Ruth, in the tone of a person who was thinking aloud, rather than addressing another. “Boys and girls grow up together, have no secrets from each other, share their joys, and divide their sorrows, and then suddenly there comes a break in their childish love. Outside influences draw them away; they go their separate ways, and never meet again on this side of the grave.” She sighed heavily as she said these words.

The next day after Ruth’s arrival, Mabel received a letter from Percy Carrick, in which that gentleman expressed the hope that he might be allowed to resume his visits. Mabel read the letter aloud to her new friend.

"Who is this Mr. Carrick, my dear?" asked Ruth, suspiciously.

Mabel narrated to her the story of their acquaintance.

"Humph ; and he pays great attention to you ?" was Ruth's remark after this.

"Oh, no. We are only very good friends."

"Friends is a very vague term, my dear Mabel."

"But I assure you he is nothing more. He has often told me he never intends to marry. And there is no danger of my falling in love with him," added Mabel sadly.

"Why not ?" asked Ruth, struck by the manner in which those words were uttered.

"Oh, because I never intend to marry," replied Mabel, a little confusedly.

"Well ! you have taken a wise resolution," said Ruth. Then she added, after a pause, "Keep your heart whole, Mabel. As long as you can do that, you will escape any great misery."

## CHAPTER XIV.

### TAKING ROOT.

SLOWLY but surely did the seeds of suspicion planted by Percy Carrick begin to bear fruit in the mind of Beatrice. He was too astute to bring any direct charge against her betrothed, but those hints and inuendoes did more to shake her faith than a straightforward accusation, which could have been easily sifted and disproved. Cyril had communicated to her the circumstances of Caleb Markham's death, and in a sudden impulse of womanly compassion, she had asked him if she might not visit Mabel, and offer her some consolation in her deep affliction. For a moment he had felt inclined to accept her

offer, but he remembered how little there would be in common between the two women, moving in such different spheres : her visit would be more productive of embarrassment than consolation. He had declined it, therefore, almost immediately.

Had her mind been perfectly free from the suspicions planted there by Carrick, she would not have pondered over this refusal, would have attributed it to the right cause. But now she found herself putting the worst construction upon it. "Is it possible that this girl has the empire over his heart, and I am but a later love?" she asked herself bitterly. "Is it Lady Beatrice Neville, one of the queens of the world of fashion, who can give to ambition the sole advantage it lacks, whom he loves—not the woman? Can I believe this of him? Could he have acted so well at Cheverton; have summoned the counterfeit of passion at will into his voice, his eyes? No, I will not believe it; at least, not until I have stronger proof. Alas! what proof can I have? He will not let me visit this girl.

Can he fear that I should learn too much?" With such torturing questions did Beatrice lacerate her own heart. Was she foolish to put them? What woman in her position, conscious, as she could not but be, that all the advantages of such a match came from her side, could refuse to listen to doubts so subtly instilled?

And Cyril's conduct of late had helped to confirm these doubts. He saw her less often: stayed away, as it seemed, on purpose from places where he could have met her.

"It is a long time since I have seen you," she said in a cold voice to him one night.

"We see very little of each other when we do meet," he said bitterly.

She did not understand the reason of his absence; did not know how painful to his pride was this secret betrothal, these hurried interviews. She replied indignantly.

"And you seem to consider even that little unnecessary."



It was the first time he had ever heard her indulge in the language of complaint.

"You misjudge me," he said sadly. "I consider that little very unsatisfactory."

"It is not my fault, Cyril," she answered haughtily. "I have done all that lay in my power."

"I know it, and am grateful to you," he said in a softened tone; "but the fact remains, that I, your betrothed, the man who is shortly to be your husband, have less privileges than a common stranger. Cannot you try to understand my feeling, Beatrice?"

Her judgment was too warped. She answered coldly, "It is hard for both."

"I know it," said Meredith, with some resentment in his manner at her want of sympathy. After a pause, he added,

"Still you can understand that I do not care to see you surrounded by group after group in which I dare not intrude, for fear that they should guess the truth."

"It is better then to keep away from so painful a scene."

"Beatrice, can you be so unjust?" asked Cyril in a voice of reproach.

She smiled satirically as she answered. "You men make such a wide interval between theory and practice. Before we let you know our hearts, how humble you are! You are content with leave only to gaze upon us; satisfied if we reward your devotion with a smile that merely signifies our vanity is gratified by it. Afterwards—but why pursue the subject?" she added, with a sudden warmth in her manner. "Why narrate what every other woman finds out for herself soon enough? Let us talk of other matters."

"You are not yourself to-night," he answered coldly. "You are unjust, ungenerous."

"Have *you* been yourself for some time past?" was the answer.

"In my love for you, I am always the same."

"You would be ashamed to own that it had cooled, when you avowed it so fervently."

"Beatrice, I cannot understand your manner," he said gravely. "I cannot understand what there has been in my conduct to give you offence. Why not speak plainly."

"Speak plainly!" echoed his betrothed in a tone that was almost passionate. "Do you think that I would condescend to instruct a lover in what points his conduct fell short of what I had a right to expect?"

A deep gloom overspread her lover's brow as he answered, in a tone as haughty as her own,

"If that speech was prompted by the pride that is proper to every woman, be she high or low, I have no answer to make to it. If it was prompted by the pride that is fostered by your birth and position, I can only say that to me its utterance is a needless insult."

Proud and courageous as she was, Beatrice felt her glance sink before his flashing gaze: she knew that she had gone too far, had taken a cruel advantage.

"Forgive my impetuosity," she said,

almost humbly. "I can ask you to believe that those worldly accidents of which you speak are the last weapons with which I would wound you."

His brow cleared by magic at that humble tone and apology.

"I was wrong to judge so hastily," he said, in a softened voice. "But I am very sensitive on that point, as you know of old, and perhaps I discern a slight where none is intended."

So peace was restored between them for that evening ; but peace did not come back to the heart of Beatrice, although she prayed for her old faith in her betrothed.

Percy Carrick came up to her soon after Cyril had left.

"You do not look very well this evening, Beatrice," he said.

"I have had a fatiguing day. I am tired."

"I called on the fair Mabel Markham this afternoon."

"Is she recovering from her great grief?"

"She looks better than she did. Meredith's aunt is staying with her."

"Indeed!" said Beatrice, in surprise. Cyril had not told her of it.

"Yes, a grim old lady: looks as if she ought to take charge of a reformatory, or something of that sort, where strict discipline is preserved."

"It will be some society for her," said Beatrice, listlessly.

"I suppose it came about from Meredith's suggestion. The old lady has been very handsome in her youth, I should say, but not much like her nephew."

Beatrice made no answer to this, and Percy, finding that she did not seem much inclined for conversation, soon went away.

"A quarrel, I should judge. I saw them talking together in a very earnest manner." So ran his reflections when he was alone.

"A very little of that sort of thing will soon separate them. He's as haughty as the devil, and she is, in that respect, his match. I fancy my scheme is ripening. I must inform my dull and honourable-minded coadjutor of my success."

## CHAPTER XV.

### CROSS - EXAMINATION.

It did not take Percy Carrick long to discover Mabel Markham's secret. It was revealed to him in flashes, as it were, by little signs that would have meant nothing to a less keen observer. He had become now almost as frequent a visitor as Meredith ; it was pleasant to him to lounge in there any time in the morning or afternoon or evening, for he was welcome at any hour which was not filled up by other engagements. He had tendered of his own accord to Ruth Meredith the same explanation of his visits that Cyril's questioning had drawn from him.

There was not a doubt, he said to

himself, that Mabel loved Meredith. The only point to be debated in his own mind, was whether he should tell her that the man she loved was already betrothed.

In the first place, his genuine liking for Mabel provoked pity for so unhappy and hopeless an attachment; in the second place, he thought it not impossible that he should procure an assistant in his plot against the marriage. These two reasons combined, prompted him to abuse for the second time the confidence that Beatrice had placed in him.

"I wonder Meredith does not marry," he said in a careless tone to her one day.

Mabel did not answer, but her countenance changed immediately.

"A good many women would marry him for his celebrity," continued Percy.

If he knew that Mabel loved Meredith, he must have known also that such a speech as that would plant a dagger in her heart. But Percy Carrick had no compunction when he was experimenting. He was as indifferent to the sufferings of his

victims as the anatomist to the torture of the animal on which he is inflicting unspeakable anguish in the interests of science.

Mabel answered, with a great effort,  
"I suppose so."

"Can you keep a secret? They say a woman never can, you know," he asked, with a cynical laugh.

"I think so," answered Mabel, with a faint smile. She felt that something painful was coming.

"You will promise that it shall never pass your lips."

"I promise," she replied. She had turned deadly pale.

"Well, I believe that Cyril Meredith is betrothed."

Mabel tried to answer, but no word would come.

"You will never guess the lady," continued Percy, pretending not to observe her emotion.

"Tell me who she is," faltered Mabel at last, with a great effort.



"No other than Lady Beatrice Neville, the *belle* of the season."

"Are you sure of that?" she asked, in a voice that had grown suddenly firm.

"My informant was Beatrice Neville herself."

"Why is their betrothal not made public?"

"Lord Ravensworth is playing the stage father a little—keeps the engagement quiet, in the hope that they will quarrel before the two years of grace have expired," replied Percy.

It was some time before Mabel could recover herself sufficiently to talk with indifference on other matters. She had known well enough that her love was not returned, but there had always been a sweet, dim hope lurking in the recesses of her heart, that time might yet bring her the blessing she desired. That hope was crushed by the knowledge of this powerful rival. Had that rival been a woman in her own sphere, she would still not have despaired so greatly; but she felt that she had no chance against wealth and birth and beauty.

Ruth Meredith came in and found her in tears, but could not discover the cause.

"I am low-spirited to-day, Miss Meredith, that is all," she said, evasively.

"It is enough for the old to have their hearts eaten away with sorrow, but the young might at least be spared," exclaimed Ruth in an almost angry tone.

When Meredith called in that evening, Mabel was not well enough to see him. She had gone to bed with a bad head-ache, Ruth informed him.

"How do you like your new friend?" he asked, in the course of their conversation.

"I have grown to love her, even in so short a time. I found my heart not so dead as I thought it to be," replied his aunt. Her manner had lost much of its old rigidity.

"Not so dead as it has ever been to me," he said, bitterly.

"Cyril Meredith, I have been a woman suffering all my life from a great sorrow; from the recollection of sad and solemn epochs in my life," said Ruth, in a low voice.

"I have given you no cause to love me. It would have been unjustifiable if I had," she added, in an almost inaudible tone.

"It is a painful subject. We will not pursue it," replied Cyril, coldly.

"This girl has somehow unsealed the fountains of love and kindness that seemed well-nigh frozen," continued Ruth, in the same low, impressive voice. "When I hear her sweet, young voice, feel her warm kiss upon my care-worn cheek, I feel as if I were surrounded by a brighter and a purer influence, as if some tender angel's hand were leading me back to the far-off past, when sorrow, and sin, and shame, were things unknown of in the dreams of childhood."

She paused for a moment, as if she were battling with her own emotion.

"Some day you will know the secret that has compelled me to lead this wretched, isolated life," she resumed, after that pause. "Many things in that life which are inscrutable and mysterious to you now, will then appear only too clearly."

Cyril rose to leave, at the conclusion of these strange words.

"One comfort I have, at least: my gloomy guardianship has not made success in this world impossible to you. For that I thank Heaven every night," she said, as she bade him good-bye.

"The relationship is common to us both: but there is nothing in common between our lives."

Pondering deeply over his aunt's mysterious words, Cyril Meredith went on to Lord Ravensworth's house. Beatrice was, as usual, surrounded by a great crowd.

"You are early to night," she said to him as soon as they were alone for a few moments. "Rather a wonderful event. Where have you come from?"

"I have just been paying my ward, Mabel Markham, a visit."

"I should envy you if I were a man," said Beatrice sarcastically.

"What reason would there be for envy?" he asked in a surprised tone.

"So charming a ward must render the

duties of guardianship very pleasant,' replied Beatrice in the same sarcastic voice.

A new light dawned upon Cyril. Perhaps she disliked his visits to Mabel.

"I am very glad to have it in my power to befriend a girl whom I have known from childhood," he said gravely; "but I wish for her own sake that she had never stood in need of a guardian."

There was such sincerity in his voice that Beatrice's sarcasm was hushed.

"I see some people coming towards you. I will retire for the present," said he, after a short conversation on indifferent topics.

"Come back as soon as there is an opportunity."

"Ah! that was spoken like the Beatrice of old," said Cyril as he prepared to leave her. "Of late I have missed those kindly speeches."

Beatrice cast down her eyes at the rebuke. For an instant she resolved to tell him all her suspicions, but the next moment her pride triumphed, and she suffered him to leave her that night without a word of explanation.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### MABEL'S RESOLVE.

A YEAR had elapsed since Caleb Markham's death, and Mabel felt her heart broken and weary when she remembered that the old love had gone for ever, and that there was no possibility of winning the one love that could give her back the old happiness. The dull and prosaic existence which would have glided so pleasingly in the sweet dreams of maidenhood, became insufferable to her. She yearned for excitement—a life in which the feverish gaiety of the present could drown the memory of the past, and the despair of the future. In this state of restless desire, her old fondness for the stage suggested to her a ready means of

escape from the baneful thoughts engrossing her.

"I wish to take lessons in dramatic reading, Cyril," she said, abruptly, one day.

"For what object?" he asked, in a tone of displeasure.

"To be able to get on the stage."

Cyril spoke in a very grave tone:

"When you occasionally expressed a desire for this kind of life, in your father's lifetime, Mabel, I never troubled myself to point out to you the many and serious objections to such a career. Now that you make this a proposition in what seems good faith, I must tell you that it is one which not only *I* should entertain with great reluctance, but one which would have given great pain to *him*."

The ready tears came into her eyes at the mention of her father; but she replied instantly:

"I am sure that you exaggerate his objections to such a proposal. I know as well as you the many things that can be urged against a theatrical career for a

woman ; but a girl brought up as I have been would be able to avoid those dangers which threaten others less fortunate in those advantages of training and education. I have reasoned well on it."

"It is not a subject on which you can decide for yourself, my dear Mabel," replied Cyril, kindly. "You must allow the worldly judgment of your friends to decide for you."

But Mabel shook her head obstinately.

"I am resolved," she said.

"Of course, if you are so determined, I have no authority to prevent you carrying out this foolish resolve," said Cyril, angrily. "I can only say, it will occasion me much pain."

"Oh, you will soon be compensated in other quarters for the pain *I* cause you," she answered, with bitter emphasis; "Mabel Markham will stand very little chance of being remembered when you are in the society of women so greatly her superiors."

"Mabel ! do you doubt my affection for you ?"



"Oh, brotherly and sisterly affection counts for very little in this world," she said, in the same bitter tone.

"A very little reflection will enable you to see that you have been unjust. With regard to this matter, I will give you no assistance in it."

"I can do without it, no doubt," was Mabel's angry answer.

For a moment Cyril felt displeased and hurt at that angry tone, but he remembered almost immediately the forlorn condition of the poor girl. Was it unnatural after all that she should pine for a life in which there was more sunshine?" he asked himself.

"Do not let us indulge in useless anger," he said in a kind tone. "Rather let us reason calmly. I am not the man to give way to foolish and unjustifiable prejudices. I do not warn you against this career because it is one on which the world has affixed a certain stigma. I should not surrender my opinion in favour of that of the world even if I were the only one who

held it, if for that opinion I had good and broad grounds. But in this case I give you the same advice that all who had your interest at heart would proffer. The stage is surrounded by too many dangers and temptations to render it a desirable place for any girl so young and beautiful as you are. Believe me, I speak thus in your own interests."

"I am sure of that," replied Mabel in a softened voice.

"I have no fear for you," resumed Cyril. "I know that the thought of the dead father, whose life was made glad by your presence, would be the flaming beacon to warn you from the quicksands of temptation. But it is more than possible that none could save you from being shipwrecked on the rock of danger. Before you had been six months on the stage, the tongues of the shameless slanderers, whose vile amusement it is to besmirch and blacken reputations, would taint your fair fame. The world, never too eager to examine or disprove a charge, would at

length begin to believe in it from the fact of its repetition. Your beauty alone, Mabel, would be the weapon which this obscure gang of moral murderers would turn against yourself, until they made others believe that you were guilty of your own moral death. If you think that I have exaggerated this danger, ask Percy Carrick for his opinion. He is as much a man of the world as I am. Judge for yourself whether or not his opinion coincides with mine."

"Slander cannot reach innocence," exclaimed Mabel proudly.

"It can reach anywhere," replied Cyril warmly. "It can spit its venom even amidst the sacredness of the domestic hearth; can blacken with its grimy finger the fair fame of a woman strong in the armour of love and friendship. If then it can pierce through the triple wall of defence offered by obscurity, and lowliness, and isolation, how easily can it reach you there, where you dwell in a house of glass into which all eyes may peer and spy?"

"I disbelieve in these imagined dangers," was Mabel's angry exclamation. "The one thing of which I am certain is this, that I cannot endure much longer the life I am leading. I used to think it was dull with my poor father—that life was full of gaiety compared to this. It was excessively kind of your aunt to offer her companionship: but," she added with a faint smile, "there is some old proverb to the effect that one bird does not make a summer. One friend does not make your life joyous."

"You remember that we talked once before on this subject," replied Cyril. "I told you my history, and exhorted you to take a lesson from it. Cultivate the art for which you have a genuine talent, and you will emerge from this obscurity which is repugnant to you, as it was to me for ten weary years. You must wait and hope."

"I have not the patience to do that."

"Here, at least, your life, let it be as obscure as it may, belongs to you," answered Cyril. "In the career for which you manifest so strong an inclination, it

will belong to all. Those who pay you will claim a right to make you the theme of conversation, to recall every gesture, look and tone."

"There is more of shade than sun in all life, I have no doubt," said Mabel, "but *that* life has some advantages over others, From whom should I receive compassion here for any great sorrow? *There*, tears will flow readily, if not for real, for mimic woe. It would be something to feel that you could wring their hearts even for an hour as your own had been wrung for years." She uttered those last words with an intense bitterness.

Cyril made no reply. He could not comprehend the meaning of her desponding words.

"Why should *I* study the world? What link is there between us that I should bow to its opinions? If I had friends, most of them would greatly scorn me, look upon me as a creature who offended a too fastidious taste," resumed Mabel. "But I have no friends. You and Percy Car-

rick are the only human beings who visit me."

"My dear Mabel," said Cyril, rising to go, "you are evidently not in a mood to argue calmly. You seem struggling against some hidden bitterness that I cannot understand. When you are alone, you will perhaps reflect over my objections to this project, and ask yourself if they should not have great weight against your own judgment. You may see Percy Carrick before I come again. If so, tell him what you have told me, and let me know if you have converted him more easily than myself to your own views."

"You have been very kind to me, Cyril," she answered, as they shook hands. "I understand and admit the force of your objections." Then she added, almost passionately, "But I am resolved to lead this wretched life no longer. I will embrace anything that takes me from it."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### A THEATRICAL PUPIL.

MABEL discovered in Percy Carrick a no less ardent opponent of the stage than in Cyril Meredith. In this instance his advice was remarkably unselfish, for it did not escape his astute observation that Lady Beatrice's jealousy would be more easily fanned by the knowledge that her rival was an actress. But he liked Mabel too well to sacrifice her to his own interests, or to the chance of serving them ; so he opposed the idea most strenuously.

Ruth Meredith was the only one of her three friends who would listen with any degree of patience to the girl's proposal. "There is much to be said against it, of

course," she had remarked, when Mabel first ventured to hint her intention. "There is plenty of danger to fall into, for those who cannot walk steadily. But then danger awaits a woman at every step in life : it may be as close to her in a little, obscure village, as on a public stage. She has her destiny in her own hands, and can keep it, if she likes."

Cyril, however, would give her no assistance. So Mabel had to take the initiative herself. She knew the address of one of the best teachers in the profession—a veteran, who had trained some of the most promising actors of the day. To his house, therefore, with a flushed cheek and a beating heart, she made her way. Mr. Morton was at home, said the servant who opened the door, but was at present engaged with a pupil. Would the lady wait? Mabel answered that she would wait.

She was ushered upstairs into a rather dingy drawing-room, where she sat for upwards of half an hour. As she passed the dining-room, she had heard a female



voice speaking in that measured, modulated tone which told of declamation. She presently heard a man's voice raised very loudly for a few minutes ; at the end of that time there was a heavy fall on the floor that shook the whole house. The pupil was evidently going through the "business" of the profession. Mabel turned a little pale as she thought of the prospect before her. In a very short time, Mr. Morton came into the drawing-room. He was a tall, fine-looking man, with a countenance to which his habitual assumption of the sterner characters of the drama had imparted a mingled dignity and severity. His voice was very deep, and Mabel had a vague impression that her own sounded very weak beside it."

"You wish for my professional assistance," he asked, with a stately bow.

"If you please," replied poor Mabel, very humbly and nervously. If Cyril Meredith or Percy Carrick had been there to state her case, she would have felt more courageous, but it was the awful feel-

ing of doing it all by herself that unnerved her.

The dignified Morton inclined his head again, and waited for further information.

"I have never taken lessons before : I have no knowledge of elocution or stage business," said Mabel, desperately, impelled to speak by this awful pause. "But I am very fond of acting, and if I have any talent for it, I should like to take to it as a profession."

"You can recite me something, just to give me an idea of what you can do?" asked Mr. Morton. The evident nervousness from which his new pupil was suffering did not inspire him with a very favourable opinion of her capacity. "Of course, I need hardly tell you that success in our profession cannot be obtained without hard work," he said, with a severe smile. "Many young people think that because they can recite to please their friends in a drawing-room, they only require a few lessons to bloom into a Siddons. It is my duty to

dispel such illusions at once," he added, sternly.

"Oh, of course, it is very foolish to be so ambitious," replied Mabel, readily, seeing that it was best to agree quickly with so severe looking an antagonist.

"What will you recite to me?" asked Mr. Morton, after a pause.

She named some pieces from well-known poets

He shook his head at her repertoire. "There is no acting in those. Do you know any thing from Shakespeare, from Romeo and Juliet?"

"I know the friar scene," replied Mabel, in a very faint voice.

"Give me that then. Recite as if you couldn't see me."

"I am afraid I shall not be able to do that the first time."

"Well, try [and forget me as much as possible. I will sit in this easy chair, and repeat the friar's lines at the proper intervals."

Thus exhorted, Mabel asked in a very

small voice, "Are you at leisure, holy father?" and when Mr. Morton had intimated, in a deep tone, that he was at her service, she requested him, in a very tame manner, "to weep with her, past help, past hope."

The veteran listened to her with great attention to the close, his keen eye taking in every gesture, and his sharp ear noting every inflection of her voice. Once or twice there was a ring of true passion in her performance, when she forgot for a moment the severe eye fixed upon her. But as a rule, she was painfully aware of his chilling presence.

"You would not be heard on the stage," was Mr. Morton's first comment.

"You think I have no ability?" asked Mabel, in despair.

"No, I do not say that," he replied, gravely. "I cannot say that I see any indication of the makings of an actress, from what you have shown me this morning. But first impressions are not to be trusted in these cases. You are evidently labouring

under great nervousness, and that prevents you from showing what you can do. Get up as much of Juliet as you can, and come to me with it this day week. Study it well, take your own reading of it ; ask yourself what gesture, what tone is suited to each passage. Above all, closely copy nature. Put yourself, as far as you are able, into the position of your heroine : think how you would feel and act under the same circumstances. Don't be afraid of doing anything because it may be wrong ; if it is wrong, I will tell you when you have done it. Now, I will just show you how these speeches ought to be delivered."

Mabel followed his performance with eager eyes and ears. She saw that his method was entirely different from her own, but she felt she could master it. After he had finished, they went into terms, and he learned for the first time his new pupil's name.

"My father was a member of the Criterion Club. Perhaps you knew him?"

"Very well, indeed," replied Morton.

He had heard of Caleb Markham's sudden death, and attributed Mabel's wish to go upon the stage to poverty. "I am sorry that you cannot take to some other profession," he said, kindly. "I have been in it many years, and have done fairly, too; but I never recommend it if anybody asks me."

Everybody advised her against it, Mabel thought, half-sadly to herself, even the very man to whom it had afforded the sole means of livelihood.

"I am not compelled to resort to it for a living," said Mabel. "But my life is rather dull, and I have a *penchant* for it, as I said to you at first."

Mr. Morton smiled more kindly than was his wont. He was beginning to thaw under the genial influence of Mabel's beauty.

"Ah, I have seen hundreds of young people who thought the stage was a fairy land; I thought so myself when I was a lad, and saw a provincial actor—'the eminent tragedian' as they called him in the

bills—strutting about as Richard the Third. But, egad, a little practical experience soon dispels that allusion. Our profession is like every other : there are very few prizes in it, and there are too many people trying for them.”

“ You draw a very gloomy picture,” said Mabel, gravely.

“ It is one drawn by the hand of experience, my dear,” replied the veteran. His manner was so dignified, that his use of the word “ dear ” seemed fatherly, not rude. Then he added, with a smile, “ But, of course, you think the future is very bright, no doubt. Well, come to me next week, and we shall then be better qualified to form an opinion.”

So Mabel left, scarcely certain in her own mind whether she liked Mr. Morton or not. His manner, during the last few minutes of their conversation, had been much more genial. Of one thing she was sure, he would prove a very severe master.

She took Ruth into her secret the same evening, after extorting from her a solemn

promise not to tell Cyril or Percy until she gave her permission.

“He could not give you his verdict so soon, of course?” asked Ruth.

“Oh, no. The fact is, I felt a perfect little fool. I could scarcely get my words out. He is such a severe man, too. Had he been different, I should not have been so frightened. But he showed me how to do it, and I know he will not think it is the same stuttering, and stammering girl when I go next week.”

“I am not sure that I am acting rightly in not protesting against it,” said Ruth, musingly. “But there!” she added, after a pause, “I shall be at home to protect you, if you need protection; and it will not be long before you get somebody with a better right to be your protector than I have.”

“Perhaps so,” replied Mabel, quietly. “But, Miss Meredith, will you kindly give me my ‘cues’?—the last line of the other part you know—for I want to begin my



practice at once. I will show you what I mean."

And Ruth Meredith watched her performance with a strange expression of tenderness on her stern, care-worn face.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### MABEL'S PROGRESS.

WHEN Mabel took her second lesson, she found that her nervousness of the awe-inspiring presence of Mr. Morton had departed to a great extent. Her performance was, therefore, fairly satisfactory, taking into consideration the little instruction she had received. In the reading of two or three passages, she evinced an originality of ideas, which, without being adopted by her teacher, showed him that he had formed too poor an opinion of her capacity at the outset.

"A great, I might almost say a wonderful, improvement," was his verdict at the end of the lesson.

"Do you think I shall ever make an actress?" asked Mabel, eagerly.

Mr. Morton smiled at her eagerness. "I cannot give you a decided opinion so soon," he said, cautiously, "but if every lesson shows as much improvement as this one, I think I shall not be exciting your hopes too greatly by saying yes."

Mabel went home in the seventh heaven of rapture after those words. She discounted the future, and saw columns of eulogistic newspaper reports, houses crowded from pit to gallery, showers of bouquets, and all the other accessories of scenic triumph.

"Mr. Morton says I have improved wonderfully, and that if my progress continues at the same rate, I shall make an actress," she said to Ruth Meredith, when she reached home.

Ruth smiled gently at her enthusiasm. Perhaps she was thinking of the days when the future looked as golden to her as it was looking now to this young girl.

"I hope you told him you had secured a very intelligent prompter?" she asked.

"Oh, I forgot to tell him that. Was it not ungrateful of me?"

"Well, never mind. We must work hard."

"Yes, I must indeed; for I am going to take two lessons a week now."

And to do her justice, Mabel worked very hard; she had a genuine love for her art, and this, coupled with the prospective triumphs of the successful actress, fully sustained her enthusiasm. She was what is technically termed "a quick study;" learning her part so quickly, she had all the rest of the time to perfect herself in its interpretation.

Morton expressed himself satisfied with her progress at every lesson; at the end of the sixth, he exclaimed heartily—"That is good enough for the boards!"

Mabel turned pale with excitement and ambition, and said quickly,

"Could I really take an engagement now, Mr. Morton?"

The veteran felt he had been a little rash.  
"I should scarcely like you to do so, although

there are many professionals who play worse than you at the present moment," he said cautiously. "But I should not like to trust you before an audience till I had more confidence in your powers, and nothing but time and practice can give you that."

Mabel's enthusiasm was checked a little at this ; she felt that she must climb the ladder a little more yet. But still, to be told that she played better now than many professionals ! what higher praise could her teacher award her than this ?

"You have many good points for the stage, my dear young lady," he had said to her one day. "You must not mind me talking of them. When a pupil comes to us, we look at her much as a horse-dealer looks at the animals he is about to purchase. Complimentary, am I not ? You have a fine figure, good looks, pleasing voice. They only want to be animated with talent, and I think they will be in your case."

Now that Morton had held out to her a hope of success, she determined to confess her secret to Cyril and Percy. She told

Cyril first as her oldest friend. He said very little, but she could see by his manner that he was both pained and annoyed.

Percy received the news more calmly, as befitted a gentleman who professed himself a philosopher. He shrugged his shoulders, and said with a satirical smile,

"A wilful woman will have her wilful way, I suppose?"

"Will you not congratulate me on my progress?"

"Certainly not," was Percy's answer. "If I could have formed the least idea of what you were doing, I should have tried to inveigle Morton into a conspiracy against you. I should have exhorted him to assure you that you had no talent."

"Would you like me to go through one of my parts?" said Mabel. She had not dared to ask Cyril such a question, but she did not stand in such awe of Percy.

"No, thank you!" replied the practical Mr. Carrick. "I never can witness a regular performance without wondering whether the actors are ever conscious of

the fact that they are making great donkeys of themselves. I share old Dr. Johnson's contempt for a man who puts a hump on his back, and thinks himself Richard the Third."

"To act well, you must throw yourself into your part," said Mabel authoritatively.

"Possibly," replied Percy calmly. "Do you fancy yourself Juliet when you are acting?"

"I quite forget my own identity."

"How extraordinary!" exclaimed practical Percy. "You might put me in any situation you please, and surround me with the most romantic accessories,—I should *never* forget that I was Percy Carrick. To forget your own identity seems to me akin to madness.

"That is because you have no poetry in your composition."

"I believe there is much truth in that remark," said her companion; "I have often noticed that these poetical fellows, like Meredith for example, get idolized by the women, while a practical matter-of-fact

man like myself never gets beyond friendship."

Mabel coloured slightly at that allusion to Cyril. After a pause, Percy said—

"Meredith is dead against the acting, of course?"

"He was very annoyed when I told him."

"You are bad friends over it, I suppose?"

"There is a little coolness, perhaps, for the present."

That same evening Percy met Lady Beatrice Neville.

"Has Meredith told you the news about Miss Markham?" he asked.

"I have heard nothing," she replied, flushing slightly.

"She is going on the stage—she is taking lessons now."

"A peculiar taste; but of course the young lady knows her own mind best," remarked Beatrice, coldly. She could not think kindly of Mabel.

"Meredith has opposed it vigorously; in fact, I believe they have had a desperate



quarrel over it," said Percy, lowering his voice to a confidential tone.

There was an angry flash from Beatrice's eyes as she answered—

"Cannot Miss Markham be permitted to control her own destiny?"

Percy noted the tone and expression with great satisfaction.

"Mabel is, of course, very grieved at his opposition; but I fancy she will not give up the idea in obedience to his wishes," he said.

Beatrice bit her lip to stifle the indignant reply that would have arisen, and Percy Carrick, conscious that he had said enough to keep the flame of her jealous anger fully alight, left her to her own reflections.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### LORD WARTON'S DEPARTURE.

LORD WARTON was so disgusted with the political prospect that he resolved to go abroad for some time. Happening to meet Percy Carrick accidentally a day or two after he had formed this intention, he communicated it to him. He explained his reasons in his usual pompous style.

“ If my services could be of any use to my party, I should hold myself bound in honour to remain : but after fairly debating this question in my own mind, I have concluded that such a course is not rendered necessary. We are thoroughly disorganised, and I am afraid must remain so for a longer period than I care to contemplate. The

country has behaved in the most ungrateful manner to its greatest benefactors, and they cannot be expected to recover quickly from a moral shock of such severity."

"The prospect before us is not very cheerful, certainly."

"Will you be my companion?" asked Warton courteously.

But Percy declined this invitation. "No, thanks," he replied smiling. "'England, with all thy faults I love thee still!' I will stay and watch the course of events, and write to you when I discern the slightest ray of hope. Besides, you forget our plot against Meredith."

"I object strongly to that word, Carrick. If it were a plot, I should not be concerned in it," replied Warton haughtily. "You do not call it a plot when an officer of justice brings a criminal before the tribunals of his country. In tracking and unmasking the villainy of this moral offender, Meredith, we are only bringing a rascal to justice."

"I forgot you were so scrupulous," said

Percy, repressing with great difficulty a sneer at his friend's punctiliousness. "Let us consider our confederacy a crusade against moral offences, then. Somebody must stay here to do the business, I suppose?"

"I do not wish you to inconvenience yourself in my interests."

Percy shrugged his shoulders.

"One has to speak by the card with you," he said. "Your pride, like a shy horse, starts at the least thing it sees. I am acting in my own interests as well as in yours. I dislike Meredith as much as you do."

"I have a reason for my dislike; I do not see any for yours," said Warton, suspiciously.

"My dear Warton," replied Percy, easily, "there are some men you take a dislike to without any reason. The thing is not at all wonderful, any man of worldly experience will tell you that it is, on the contrary, of every-day occurrence. Mr. Meredith has never wronged me, so I have

no insult to avenge; I have never wronged him as yet, so I have no motive in crushing him for fear that he may retaliate. I simply detested the man from the moment I made his acquaintance, and it is to this detestation that you owe my assistance in unmasking his treacherous conduct to Beatrice."

"You have no doubt he loves this other woman?"

"Not the least," replied Percy, with hypocritical eagerness. "They speak the language of love as plainly in their actions as other persons do with their tongues." He thought to himself as he said this: "It is only half a lie, after all; poor little Mabel worships him."

"Still, you will find a difficulty in proving this to Lady Beatrice."

He always spoke of her as *Lady* Beatrice, even to a man who had known her from childhood; a woman whom Lord Warton had contemplated for a wife could not have her name treated with familiarity.

Percy laughed to himself at this punctiliousness.

"That *is* the only difficulty in the way of success," he answered.

Lord Warton drew himself up stiffly as he said—

"I would gladly have availed myself of more open means to separate Lady Beatrice from so unworthy a suitor; but as you have demonstrated to me the impossibility of my wishes, I must leave the matter in your hands."

"You will adopt the wiser course, I think," replied Percy, with a sarcasm that was lost upon his practical friend; and Warton continued, in his measured tone—

"I will let you know my whereabouts from time to time, and if this event, which we both desire, should take place during my absence, write to me at once."

"And you will return to try your chance with Beatrice."

"I shall return to see if Lady Beatrice's experience of the disastrous result to which these romantic notions have conducted her

will dispose her to perceive the advantage of an alliance with one of her own rank," said Lord Warton, pompously.

"Well, I hope I shall soon be able to send you the information you most desire," replied Percy, adding, in a half-grave, half-mocking tone, "It would be a sad day for the aristocracy of England if a man of obscure origin, like Cyril Meredith, should prove a successful rival to the heir of one of the oldest houses in the country."

Lord Warton winced slightly at the humiliating prospect conjured up by his friend, but he answered, in a calm and dignified voice—

"I trust that circumstances may conspire to prove to Lady Beatrice the folly of her romantic choice. If they should be adverse, I can only regret that I condescended to pit myself against such a rival. I do not often make a ridiculous figure, I think."

"Love has made greater men than you cut a very ridiculous figure," said Percy, coolly. He loved to indulge in a little quiet satire at the expense of the friend whom he

found so useful. For gratitude was not one of his weaknesses, especially when he did not like the person from whom he received favours ; and he had attached himself to Warton, not from any liking for the man, but because, out of all his acquaintance, he was the one who had it in his power to do him the greatest service.

A few days after this conversation, Lord Warton left England.

"Did you hear that Warton had gone abroad ?" said Percy to Beatrice when they met.

"Not exactly ; I heard somebody say he *was* going."

"He was so disgusted with the result of the election that his native country became unendurable to him : so he has shaken the dust off his feet."

"His country will be none the poorer."

"Ah ! you have never forgiven him his insult to Meredith."

"And I never shall : it was cowardly, unmanly," exclaimed Beatrice warmly. "In my grandfather's time, Lord Warton would



have been compelled to have atoned for his rashness."

"We have outlived that kind of thing: life has become too precious," said Percy coolly. "In the old days, when there was not so much intellect about, a bullet in the brains of a noodle or two did not so much matter. But we have got more enlightened: as civilization increases, self-preservation becomes more of a science. A slip of the tongue ought not to rob a man of life."

"There are some injuries for which in my opinion there is but one mode of redress, Percy."

"No, no," said the practical Mr. Carrick. "Running the risk of being killed yourself on the chance of killing your enemy, is a fool's revenge."

"Would you refuse to go out if you were challenged?" she asked in a tone that was slightly scornful.

"If my refusal to go out would bring upon me the stigma of coward, I should

certainly not disgrace my name," replied Percy gravely. "But if I could refuse without the reputation of the Carricks having to suffer, I should do so."

## CHAPTER XX.

### A FIRST APPEARANCE.

At last there arrived the joyful day when Mr. Morton told Mabel that he should have no hesitation in allowing her to appear before any audience.

Mabel was so delighted, she could scarcely restrain herself from crying.

"What is the first step we must take, Mr. Morton?" she asked eagerly.

"There are two ways of making your *debut*, the one of which costs money, and the other does not," replied her teacher.

"The inexpensive method is for me to get you an engagement as soon as I can with a manager, in London if possible, if not, in the country. My recommendation will be

sufficient to secure you an engagement, but it is more than probable that you will have to content yourself at first with secondary parts, until you have convinced the manager fully of your ability. That is the first way."

Mabel's countenance fell. The notion of playing secondary parts was very repugnant.

"The other method is, as I have said, expensive, but there is no question as to the advantages it confers upon a *débutante*. It is to hire a theatre for a night, and get together a scratch company to play with you. By that means you attract attention."

This was a much more palatable idea. Such a *début* would be attended with *éclat*, thought Mabel.

"What would be the cost of this last method?" she asked anxiously.

Morton named a sum whose comparative smallness agreeably surprised her.

"The expense is nothing, considering the benefit likely to accrue from it," she cried enthusiastically. "Oh, Mr. Morton, please let us see about it at once!"

He smiled at her enthusiasm. "Many dread the ordeal, and would put off the fatal day," he said; "but I do not fancy you will be frightened by the audience."

"I am sure I should be so absorbed in my part that I should forget them almost immediately. I was very nervous when I came to you at first, but that was because I felt I was terribly ignorant. Now, I *know* my own powers. My confidence in them gives me strength. I do not entertain the least apprehension."

"Your friend, Mr. Meredith, has several friends amongst the critics," said Morton. "If he will exert himself to secure their attendance, and you play as well as you play with me, I predict a grand success for the rising actress, Miss Mabel Markham."

Mabel asked Cyril's advice upon the subject, and feeling that nothing could persuade her from taking this step, he agreed with her as to the desirability of making her first appearance in what her instructor termed the expensive manner.

He also used all the influence that he possessed in literary circles to get together a goodly house.

In a very few days the expeditious Morton had hired the theatre, procured a scratch company, amongst which were several of his old pupils, prepared the advertisements, and got everything in readiness for the important occasion. He had reserved for himself the character of the friar, *Romeo and Juliet* having been chosen as the play in which Mabel was to exhibit her powers. Although she had never acted before out of Morton's room, she did not show the least sign of nervousness at the rehearsals. The handsome and clever young actor who played Romeo, assured her that he never acted with a better Juliet.

The night arrived, the important night on which Mabel's fate was to be decided. The house was very full, Cyril and Carrick having done their best to create an interest in her amongst their respective circles. The critics were there in great force. In a

private box sat Cyril, Percy Carrick, and Ruth, the three who were in a pre-eminent sense, her friends. Caleb Markham's popularity at the Criterion, had brought a large contingent from that club.

"I pray fervently that she will not break down," said Percy Carrick, after a long pause.

There had not been much conversation between the three; they were too anxious for the result.

"Morton says her self-possession at rehearsal was wonderful," said Ruth.

"What is rehearsal compared to an audience?" replied Percy. "Egad, it is enough to make one shiver when one hears the bell tinkle, and sees that curtain drawn up, and knows that the whole house is listening for the first word that falls from your lips. I am pretty well accustomed to public speaking, but I don't fancy I should have courage to face an audience of this kind."

"Hush!" cried Meredith, "she will be here in a moment."

There was great applause as she came on ; her graceful figure and beautiful face predisposed the audience in her favour. For one moment she felt a feeling of intense faintness, as she bowed her acknowledgments, and saw those hundreds of eyes riveted upon her ; but the next her recollection of her own ability, and the great issue at stake restored her self-possession. She knew, too, that Morton was watching her from the wing ; and she was determined not to disgrace his instruction. In a sweet, musical voice, to which she imparted a mixture of surprise and unconcern, she answered the questions put to her by Lady Capulet.

The first opportunity for displaying the full measure of her ability came in the balcony scene. Nothing could have exceeded the tenderness and maidenly frankness, never overstepping the bounds of modesty, with which she confessed and justified her love. She was throughout the pure-hearted, simple-minded girl whom her great passion transforms into a martyr and a heroine.



The loud and prolonged applause that accompanied her exit testified to her intellectual conception of the most lovable of Shakspeare's heroines.

Her performance to the close of the curtain was marked by many subtle points. Often she departed from the traditional conception of the character which Morton had given her ; sometimes, even, she was bold enough to sacrifice applause for the sake of a rendering that gained in subtlety what it lost in effectiveness. Many actors and actresses get into the habit of working up their voice in their last speech, until they make their exit in a perfect shout, whether the true interpretation of the character justifies such a method or not. Mabel did not fall into this error: she wished to give an artistic and natural impersonation, without taking into calculation the disturbing element of momentary applause. In the potion scene, her intense passion, so removed from the mere vulgar declamation that often does duty for it, produced an electrical effect. It was some time before

the audience could recover sufficiently from the spell cast over them by the genius of the actress, to bestow upon her the tokens of their approval.

"It is a great success, no doubt, for a first appearance," said Cyril, when Juliet, led on by Morton, had bowed her last to the audience.

The tone in which these words were uttered prompted Carrick to answer—

"And you can scarcely make up your mind to be pleased or not."

"You have guessed my feeling," said Cyril. Since the night of that interview in Caleb Markham's drawing-room, he had lost a good deal of his old prejudice against Percy. How capricious are circumstances! When Percy had formed no design against his happiness, he had disliked him heartily; now that he was plotting against him to the best of his ability, he entertained a more favourable opinion of him.

"I should not like it to have been a total failure," continued Cyril, thoughtfully; "but had it been a success of that moderate

nature that does not permit the indulgence of higher hopes, I think it would have been better. As it is, her path to the stage will only be too open ; more triumphs will confirm her inclination for such a career, and she will become what neither her father nor I ever contemplated without pain."

They all drove home together, Mabel in a state of great excitement and delight. Ruth whispered to Cyril, "Do not say any thing to damp her to-night, poor child."

The supper, however, would have proved a very dull meal had it not been for the efforts of Percy Carrick, who never allowed himself to regret the inevitable. It was he who proposed, in a jocular speech, "the health and success of the promising young actress !"

Mabel looked pained for an instant. She had expected that Cyril would have undertaken this duty. Perhaps he divined that feeling, for he said, quickly—

"Your success will always be dear to me, Mabel, but, of course, I cannot help

wishing that it could be success in any other career than this."

"You will forgive me some day," she said, with a charming smile.

Cyril did not answer that pleading speech. He felt that he could not hold out any hope of ever regarding her resolution in a more favourable light.

Mr. Carrick was not so scrupulous. "After all, everybody has a right to choose his own destiny," he cried, gaily. "If I thought that nature had intended me for a Hamlet or a Richard the Third, I should think it the height of impertinence for any friend to take umbrage at my obeying my own instincts."

After they had left, and Mabel was alone in her own chamber, she sat for a long time wrapped in deep thought. She had achieved a great triumph ; a triumph which would have brought happiness to many young women with stronger and more painful reasons for desiring success than her own : women to whom such success would have meant rescue and refuge from a sordid

and degraded life. But presently, in the midst of her proud and happy reflections, the tears came quickly into her eyes ; for it seemed to her that a triumph, however great, if shared with no one, is very barren. The one man who had loved her with a life's devotion, whose tenderness for her would have persuaded him to pardon even disobedience to his wishes, was lying where no loving voice could reach him ; and the man whose love would have more than compensated her for the relinquishment of this feverish ambition, looked upon her splendid triumph as a matter for regret.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### CLOUDS UPON THE HORIZON.

THE performance of "Juliet" soon bore substantial fruit. A manager of one of the best London theatres offered Mabel an engagement on very advantageous terms, a full benefit being included amongst them. The sum named almost took her breath away, and she felt that she was on the high road to fortune. She suggested immediately to Ruth the necessity of moving to a better residence than the one which they occupied at present.

"Appearance is everything, you know, my dear Miss Meredith," she said, with an assumption of worldly wisdom that sat very charmingly on her.

So Mabel played the *rôle* of the heroine in a new drama from the pen of one of the most successful dramatists of the day ; an author who was held to have disgraced himself if his piece ran for less than a hundred nights. The character afforded splendid opportunities for the display of her varied powers. The notices were unanimous in eulogy, and the house was filled nightly by crowded audiences.

And, as Cyril had foreseen, her success began to bear some objectionable fruits. Her cartes-de-visite were visible in every shop window ; her name came up very frequently in conversations at clubs to which he belonged, where many men forgot, or were not aware, of his intimate relation to her. Fashionable gentlemen who went in for this kind of thing, sought an introduction to her. Ruth Meredith guarded her like a dragon ; but what was one against so many ?—and Mabel was by nature so unsuspicious, and so fond of gaiety and company, that she was only too glad to receive the people who desired her

acquaintance—much, of course, to their satisfaction.

But Cyril was not unmindful of the trust bequeathed to him by her dead father; he resolved to watch over her to the best of his power, and, to accomplish his purpose, he went very often to her house when she received these fashionable visitors, in order to observe whether there was anything that demanded his interference.

And in process of time, his name got coupled with her own amongst the club cliques and coteries. Anything marked in the conduct of a man so well known in society and the world of letters, was sure to be noted and discussed. And Percy Carrick was, of course, the first to prepare a *rechauffé* of all these rumours, and serve it up to Beatrice.

Remonstrating with her suitor seemed to Beatrice a nact of humiliation; as she had told him,—when she condescended to speak with a lover on such a subject, it would be to release him from his allegiance. Still, she would have been untrue to her sex if



she had not suffered her indignation to appear occasionally when they were together.

"You take a great interest in Mabel Markham," she said to him one day.

"There is no other to take any interest in her, poor child."

"I have heard your friendship commented on."

"There is nothing in it to deserve comment," he answered coldly.

"The world is so suspicious, you see," was her satirical remark.

"The world is a fool!" exclaimed Cyril in an angry tone.

"I begin to have more respect for the world's prejudices and opinions than I did," said Beatrice, in a voice that implied an almost bitter meaning.

"Since when have you become a convert?" he asked coldly.

"I can scarcely answer that question," replied she, trifling with her fan. "Conversion begins from the first moment when our faith in an old religion becomes

in the least degree shaken ; when we find that our idol is made of common clay, and not of the gold we fancied."

" Beatrice !" he said gravely, " this is not the first time I have observed that the mention of Mabel Markham's name leads to some bitter reflections on your part ; reflections which do not fall less disagreeably on my ear, because their meaning is somewhat obscure. I have before invited you to tell me frankly if there is anything in my conduct which unknowingly gives you offence. You have declined to comply with my invitation, but you have not thought fit to refrain from indulging in these cynical and unjust remarks which impelled me to proffer it. These are words which it gives me great pain to utter, but I speak them in self-justification. Tell me at once, if my friendship for Mabel Markham causes you displeasure."

Beatrice mastered her indignation but not her pride in her answer.

" Cyril Meredith, do you think that if I suspected for a moment that there was in

your friendship for Mabel Markham just grounds for provoking the reasonable resentment of your betrothed, I should hesitate in showing you by what swift means I resented such an insult to my pride? Do you think if I felt certain that I occupied a subordinate place in your heart, I should hold you bound by the declaration you made last year?"

Cyril answered her with gravity and dignity; the emphasis which she had given to certain phrases showed plainly that she entertained suspicions dishonouring to him.

"If I were conscious of any alteration in the feelings with which your nobility of nature first inspired me; if I had lowered you for one instant from the lofty pedestal which my love and reverence have raised for the reception of your image, those words would indeed overwhelm me with the keen remorse which is the traitor's sole expiation of his treachery. But, Beatrice, my conscience is as clear as your own; the heart which thrilled at a touch, a glance

then, vibrates to the same influences now. Were a malignant fate to separate our destinies to-morrow, I should still enshrine you in the temple of my heart, until love and life failed together; you would still know that there was one man left on earth who in parting with the hope of calling you his wife, wrenched asunder the one golden link which bound him to a happy future."

For a moment the doubts of Beatrice almost melted in the fervent glow of his words.

"With regard to my friendship for Mabel Markham, the facts are simple," he continued in the same grave and dignified tone. "I have known her since she was a child; felt for her the same as I should have felt for a sister, had my boyhood been made less solitary by such companionship. Before his death, her father bequeathed her to me as a sacred trust; the confidence he reposed in me I will deserve. The mere sense of gratitude would compel me to watch over his

daughter, for to him, to his advice and encouragement, to the words of hope with which he cheered me, when there did not appear a ray of light to pierce the darkness spreading like a pall over my future, I owe the continued faith in my own powers which has led me at last to success."

He paused a moment, perhaps for Beatrice to reply, but as no word came from her, he resumed.

"Contrary to my advice, in opposition to the wishes of her dead father, she has chosen a career which is surrounded by dangers and temptations to one so unworldly and so beautiful. These dangers and temptations are now beginning to threaten her, and if I go so often amongst the men who make her house their lounging place, and perhaps the plotting ground for some unholy design, it is because I may be ready to save her from the results of her own inexperience ere it be too late."

Beatrice was silent. His manly and dignified explanation almost restored her old faith in him. "Am I weak and foolish

to torture my heart with these doubts," she said when she was alone with her own thoughts. "Oh, Cyril, how I pray for my old belief and confidence in your love! And yet would the world talk without some ground for suspicion? I know not which to believe, him or the world. Would that I could procure some convincing proof to relieve me from this terrible suspense."

## CHAPTER XXII.

### MR. BARRY.

ONE of the most frequent visitors at Mabel's house was a Mr. Digby Barry, a gentleman, whose reputation did not stand very high in the estimation of those of his acquaintance who knew his antecedents and amusements. Well-born, good-looking, and tolerably well off, he was one of those men who divide their attention pretty equally between the society to which they belong by birth, and any other society to which their birth and social advantages procure them ready admission. Cyril had noted this man's presence at Mabel's house with great dissatisfaction: his reputation was such that any woman belonging to her world who was seen in his company, was

most likely to suffer for it from the tongues of scandal-mongers.

Mabel's inexperience disposed her to form a favourable opinion of Mr. Digby Barry, simply because he possessed agreeable manners, and was very fluent in compliments. Mr. Barry, it may be remarked, always expressed himself in the language of admiration to every woman out of his own proper sphere, for whom he professed a friendship, and there were not wanting plenty of undiscerning women who pronounced him to be a very charming man in consequence of this habit.

Sunday was, of course, Mabel's great day for receiving her visitors : the majority of these were gentlemen, a few women of unblemished reputation in her own world, helping to fill her rooms. Mr. Barry scarcely ever missed a Sunday, and Cyril Meredith, knowing this, and having his suspicions of such constant visits, made it a point to visit her on that day himself. Of course, no one present could interpret his real motive, but attributed his constant



presence to Mabel's attractiveness. In this manner had their names become coupled together.

"Here is Mr. Meredith come to worship at the shrine of the tragic muse!" cried Barry one Sunday evening, as Cyril entered. There were plenty of people there, and conversation was going on briskly, but Barry was a man whose remarks generally attracted attention.

"You are a fanatic in the worship yourself," replied Cyril coldly.

There was a general hush in all the conversations: everybody wished to listen to a verbal war between two men, one of whom had so high a reputation in the world of letters; while the other was a well-known wit at dinner parties, and in society generally.

"I show my devotion very plainly to the world," said Barry with a sneer. "There are others who being half ashamed of their fanaticism, have the cleverness to pass for infidels with those who cannot see through the mask."

Cyril was silent : the only answer he could have returned to so rude a speech would have been an insulting one, and he had no desire to provoke a quarrel in Mabel's presence.

"We all bow lowly and humbly before Miss Markham," continued Barry, elated by the laugh which had welcomed his retort. "When a young lady comes forth from private life in order that she may give the public the benefit of her talents, the least the public can do is to prove itself worthy of the sacrifice. Eh, Mr. Meredith?"

This was a direct challenge, and Cyril accepted it at once.

"It is a pity, Mr. Barry," he said sternly, "that ladies who enter upon a public career, much to the chagrin of their real friends, cannot be contented with the homage they receive when their talents are called into play. They would then escape this spurious adulation which must soon pall upon the most insatiate vanity."

Mr. Barry smiled calmly; he thought

he saw his way to another triumphant retort.

“The respect of the world is prized by all. You, for example, are an author, and the homage paid to your talent is properly confined to your readers. But I have no doubt you would consider yourself hardly used if that attention which society now pays to you as a man of genius, were suddenly withdrawn. I suspect this ‘spurious adulation,’ as you term it, does not pall upon you, Mr. Meredith.”

There was a general disposition to laugh at the cleverness of Barry’s “*tu quoque*” argument, but before there was time to indulge in it, Cyril replied in a clear scornful tone.

“You forget, Mr. Barry, the important difference of sex. A public man knows that the homage is paid to his talents : a beautiful woman is sometimes too inexperienced to know that the greater portion of the homage rendered to her is paid to her beauty.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed Barry, sneeringly ;

“and I should think there was no woman who would not be thoroughly satisfied to attribute it to such a cause.”

Cyril had a deep loathing for that class of men who, by loose and suggestive conversation, strive to lower the tone of society to their own moral level. The attempt to take advantage of a woman's foibles in order to ruin her, seemed to him a sure mark of cowardice and depravity. 'Tis true the world condones this shameful wrong, so long as it does not affect itself individually, but it is not also true that while it strives to elevate and inculcate respect for women, it fails to ensure their protection.

In scornful tones he said, “Your mode of estimating women is, in my opinion, a sure mode of degrading them. A woman may have too many admirers; as it affects her reputation, it much depends on the class of men to which they belong. A woman, artless and frank in her nature, inexperienced in the ways of the world, has as much need to guard herself from calumny

and detraction, as from the snares and wiles of the profligate."

Barry bit his lips; that stinging retort had chafed him into silence, for he saw a general smile pervade the company, to whom his reputation was sufficiently known. He felt, and he knew it to be also the opinion of all, that Cyril Meredith's words were true and unanswerable.

But of course all looked upon this encounter as arising from a feeling of rivalry and jealousy between the two men, and the scene got talked about, until it reached the ears of Percy Carrick, who, in the pursuit of his perfidious schemes, lost no time in narrating it for the benefit of Beatrice. This astute gentleman had now developed another motive, in addition to his hatred of Meredith, for sowing discord between him and Beatrice: he had begun to cherish the ambition of winning this great matrimonial prize for *himself*. If he could separate them before Warton returned, the path was clear for him. Once he had felt certain that he was the last man in the world

to inspire love in Beatrice, but his opinion had undergone a change since then. Deceived by her own lover, what more likely in a woman of her proud temperament, than to bestow herself upon a man only superior to him in point of birth, in order to make his punishment more complete? Percy Carrick put this question to himself very frequently, and he generally evolved a satisfactory answer. It was true that he had undertaken this plot against Meredith in the interests of his friend Lord Warton; the recollection of this rose up sometimes like a dangerous rock in the smooth sea of his reflections. But he was not a man to discount difficulties so far a-head. "Time enough to think of this when I have won her for myself," he thought.

In the meanwhile, time was going fast; the last year of probation would soon expire, and Lady Beatrice Neville would be Lady Beatrice Meredith beyond power of prevention, unless he could discover some tangible proof of her lover's inconstancy. Unfortunately, no proof was forth-

coming ; he had nothing to go upon but the scandal and the tattle of small club coteries, and these were not sufficient grounds on which to base the reflection of a lover.

"Fate is against me," muttered Percy to himself as he pondered over the future, and thought how unkind fate was not to aid him in his villainy. "I had hoped to secure that little Mabel for an accomplice ; what is love worth, if it allows you to surrender your lover meekly to another woman without a struggle ? But I soon found that I had calculated wrongly in that direction. Mabel wouldn't tell a lie, or act one, to save her heart from breaking. Highly honourable and proper, no doubt, but sometimes excessively inconvenient ! If she had only joined with me, we could have arranged a splendid plot together."

Thus do men scheme and plot ; seeing, as they think, clearly into the uncertain future ; removing in their own shallow conceptions, all obstacles that may mar

their hopes ; when, lo ! in the midst of their tangled schemes, they are suddenly baffled by some obscure and secondary cause which had escaped their sagacious scrutiny.

The sterling character of Mabel Markham had dissipated his hopes of making her an accomplice, and he must descend to lower depths ere he could consummate his villainous purpose.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

### BAFFLED.

CYRIL called upon Mabel one afternoon, and found her alone ; an empty envelope addressed to her was lying on the table. He recognised the handwriting as that of Digby Barry.

“ Has that man written to you ? ” he asked sternly, with a glance at the table.

Mabel flushed at that stern tone. “ He has,” she answered haughtily.

“ I do not wish to spy into your affairs or your correspondence, my dear Mabel,” said he in a milder tone, for he had discovered that she was much less tolerant of interference or advice than formerly ; “ but I should be abusing the trust which was

placed in me, if I hesitated to warn you against Mr. Digby Barry."

"You are so suspicious of everybody," replied Mabel, with an injured air.

"In this case, at least, I have good grounds for my suspicions," he replied. "Digby Barry is a man too well known for there to be any doubt about his character."

"The fact of it is, you were always opposed to my going on the stage, and you take a dislike to every friend that I have made by this means."

"I do not deny or withdraw my objection," replied Cyril gravely. "I know it to be a bad school for most women, and an exceptionally bad one for a woman of your unsuspicious nature. And I frankly confess that I dislike, and have good reason for disliking the majority of the acquaintance that you have formed through your profession. Of all your friends, all the men who pester you with their admiration and attention, Mr. Barry is the most objectionable. The mere fact of acquaintance with

him is sufficient to taint the name of any woman in your world. You must remember, Mabel, that you are living in a house of glass, where evil eyes are fixed on you. Your position should be free from ambiguity in order to guard yourself from the slanderer's tongue."

"I live in a 'house of glass,' 'tis true, but I defy any one to cast a stone at me," cried Mabel, proudly.

"My dear child, I know that you do not deserve to have a stone cast at you," said Cyril, kindly. "But, unfortunately, in the society to which you belong, 'be thou as chaste as ice, and pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny.' When you allow such men as Digby Barry to become your friends, you court calumny by your own act."

"You have said the same of every one," replied Mabel, obstinately. "You tried to prejudice me against Percy Carrick in the same way. You are full of suspicion."

"I did not like Carrick, and I put my own construction upon his renewal of the acquaintance; such a construction as would

have been put on it by any man of the world," said Cyril. "I have reason to believe that in this instance I was mistaken. But about Barry there can be no mistake. You will hear his character at every club in London."

"All I know about him is that he is a very pleasant companion," protested Mabel.

"Possibly," answered Cyril. Then he added, in a tone of almost entreaty, "Let me decide for you in this matter, dear Mabel. I must know more of the world than you, and I have only your interest at heart when I speak thus. I do not like the idea of Digby Barry writing to you. I know the method of these men too well."

Mabel was softened immediately by that appeal. She would have dismissed a hundred Digby Barrys for a kind word from the man she loved so dearly.

"I shall not allow him to write again," she said, with dignity.

"May I see the letter?" asked Cyril, after a pause.

Mabel hesitated a moment, then handed

it to him. It was just such a letter as he had expected ; a florid epistle, accompanying the present of a bracelet, the acceptance of which by Miss Markham would afford him the greatest pleasure. Cyril crushed it in his hand, and flung it contemptuously on the floor.

“ Scoundrel !” he exclaimed, passionately. Then he turned quickly to Mabel, and said, “ Do you think that if this man had formed an honourable attachment to you, he would have declared it in this manner ? He writes to you in order to get an answer, that he may show to men of the same depraved nature, and boast that Mabel Markham accepts his presents.”

She turned very pale at this explanation of his generosity.

“ An honourable attachment !” she faltered ; “ I never thought of him in such a light.”

“ Of course not,” replied Cyril. “ You are too unworldly to fathom the motives of these men. You look upon Barry as your friend ; I tell you he is your enemy—a

base sensualist, whose only thought is the ruin of unhappy women."

"I did not mean to accept his present," explained the poor girl.

"Were you going to send it him back?"

"Of course. I should not dream of accepting presents from comparative strangers."

"Let me reply to Mr. Barry for you," said Cyril, in a stern tone. "I will answer him in such a way that he will not trouble you either with his presents or his companionship again. Nay, let me have my own way in this; believe me, I am acting for your interests," he added, as Mabel made a deprecating movement. "He is a man of the world, and he will understand my letter better than he would yours."

"Will not such a method provoke the very scandal you desire to avoid?"

"Not in the least. I will so word the letter that he will be ashamed to show it to his friends; not because his shame will arise from the exposure of his villainy, but from his being baffled in its accomplish-

ment. Failure is the only disgrace to such men as he."

So Cyril wrote the following letter to Mr. Digby Barry :—

" SIR,

" Miss Markham has submitted to me, as her guardian, your note, and the present accompanying it, which I return. She requests me to inform you that, prizing beyond measure, the purity of her own heart, it must be evident, even to Mr. Barry, that the innocent acceptance of such presents would compromise her in the eyes of the world. The tone of your note has caused her considerable annoyance, and is without justification or warrant.

" Yours faithfully,

" CYRIL MEREDITH."

" There!" he said, as he sealed it. " That will tell Mr. Barry, that he is dealing with a man of the world: and unless he is a greater fool than I take him for, he will keep his own counsel. I never

enjoyed writing a letter more, I can assure you."

"I am very grateful for your interest in me," said Mabel in a low voice.

"I will watch over you as long as life is left to me," he answered earnestly. "If there ever comes a time when that protection is no longer afforded, you must let the memory of your dead father be the beacon light that warns you from the rock of danger. Think that *he* is waiting for you yonder: that his hand will be the first to help you on to the golden shore. Think that his guarding spirit is leaning over you, following with the tender earnest gaze of yore the life of his darling little queen."

That allusion to her father melted Mabel to tears immediately.

"I have been thoughtless," she cried. "For his sake, for the sake of his memory, I should have been more discreet. I will be so in the future, Cyril, I promise. My dear loving, tender-hearted father! Not an hour passes that I do not recall some fond word or look of his. Sometimes, I long to be



with him : for the world is a weary resting place to one so forlorn as I am." And burying her face in her hands she sobbed quietly to herself.

" It will become brighter in time," said Cyril cheerfully. " Time makes us satisfied with our lot ; heals the old wounds, and softens the old sorrows."

Mr. Digby Barry received his letter, and as Cyril had prophesied, took good care not to show it to his friends. But his hatred for the man who had thwarted his sinister designs was intense. " Curse him, I'll insult him as soon as I find an opportunity," he muttered as he crushed it angrily in his hand.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### A PROOF.

PERCY CARRICK walked pensively and slowly in the direction of Mabel Markham's house, fully absorbed in the thoughts of his perfidious scheming against Cyril Meredith.

"Two or three times I have been on the point of trying to enlist her services," so ran his reflections, "but there's something about Mabel that makes me think she would not purchase her own happiness at the expense of what people who have never been tempted, and are therefore no judges in such matters, call honour. It is highly probable that if she got a hint of my intention, she would turn king's evidence and reveal my designs to Beatrice, although, if

successful, they would benefit her as well as myself. Some people are so ungrateful ! But I *must* separate Meredith and Beatrice by some means or other ; the turn that my affairs have taken renders it necessary that I should contract a brilliant alliance. Beatrice is the only woman I know who is likely to prove herself superior to those worldly considerations which with other persons would make Percy Carrick's chance very small indeed. Once convince her of Meredith's infidelity, and my way will be clear ; her pride, her scorn of his treachery will all conspire in my favour. If this should come to pass, Warton will, of course, consider himself mortally affronted. I am sorry for him, but every man studies his own interests first. Warton should not be such a fool as to trust a poor man so near a great heiress. It will give my conceited self - sufficient friend a very wholesome lesson in worldly wisdom."

With such highly moral reflections did Mr. Carrick beguile the walk from his own chambers to Mabel's house. To do him

justice, he had no idea of the terrible anguish the success of his villainous scheme would inflict upon them both. Never having experienced any emotion stronger than that of a vague fancy himself, he could not understand that any love disappointment could create more than a momentary pang. He had none of those wide sympathies, none of that fervent imagination which enable a man to comprehend in others the emotion which he has never experienced in his own person ; that subtle knowledge of human nature which is often more an instinct than an acquirement, and which opens to the poet and the philosopher the boundless realms of Nature ; the depth and diversity of human passions, the ever-changing vicissitudes of human life.

Mabel was at home, and received him with a gracious smile of welcome ; she was very fond of Percy in a sisterly way. She could not guess (few of his acquaintance, more worldly wise than she, were better judges of character in this instance) the hidden

depths lying below the smooth surface. She did not know, perhaps he did not know himself, that he was a man whom accident of birth and position alone had saved from being a great criminal. Had fate cast Percy Carrick in a lower stratum of life, reduced him to the necessity of earning his bread by real hard work, that furnished him with no hope beyond that of a bare subsistence, he would have stopped at no villainy to have bettered his condition. There are few such men in the class to which he belonged, men on whom training and example have inculcated honourable precepts, and who, in spite of all that persuades with such powerful influence to follow in the same upright path to which their steps have been directed, will yet stoop to further what may be in itself an honourable ambition by dishonourable means. And the strangest thing about him was, that his conscience seemed as incapable of a noble impulse as his heart.

Nor is it too much to aver that his intellect partook of this vital taint. He

had read in his youth the earliest records of abortive crime; of villainy flourishing for a season only to present a more exposed front to the light of detection at last. But in his utter selfishness, he could not believe that honesty was *always* the best policy, and the doubtful success of a dishonourable action never worth the risk run by the confident perpetrator. It has been said, that crime and punishment grow on the same stem, that justice is not postponed, that the dice of God are always loaded, every secret is told, every crime punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed in silence and certainty.

They talked for some time on indifferent matters, and at the first opportunity, Percy tabled the question of Cyril's marriage. He had no particular motive in doing so, except that of confirming his suspicions of Mabel's love for his rival; there was, of course, a possibility that in such a conversation some burst of womanly feeling like that betrayed by Beatrice on a similar occasion, might reveal, beyond power of

subsequent concealment or denial, her unhappy secret.

"Lord Ravensworth's last year of restriction will soon expire," he said in a tone that he purposely divested of all meaning, "and then Meredith will secure his greatest triumph of all."

Mabel was a trained actress since the day when Percy had first spoken to her on this painful subject, and the art of the actress was useful in controlling her emotion now. But skilful as she was, Percy could see sufficiently through the mask of indifference to be sure that the prospect of this alliance had as mournful an interest for her now as it had then.

"It will indeed be a great triumph," she replied briefly. Her voice was steady enough, but something in the unsmiling mouth, and the cheerless look of the eyes, contradicted the voice.

"Are you not pleased at his good fortune?" asked Carrick.

Oh, what torture it was to sit there, to feel the old wound bleeding afresh, and to

know that she could not arrest it, but must so act as to hide her sorrow from eyes that would profane it !

“ I am pleased if it is for his happiness,” she said in a low voice, in words that came from the depths of her heart. “ Can I hope it will prove so ? Lady Beatrice may love him dearly now, but has not that love sprang rather from the mind and judgment than from the heart. She has seen him courted, and caressed, knows that he will descend to posterity among those great names which are honoured beyond the sounding titles of mere worldly dignity. Has not her vanity been dazzled by his admiration ? does she not think that in linking her fate with his, she is securing a renown which could never be hers in what would be called a match suitable to her own rank ? ”

“ Faith ! you set a high value upon your poet,” said Percy, with a rather contemptuous smile. “ You seem to think he confers honour on Lady Beatrice, by this alliance ;



the majority of persons would be inclined to think the honour came from the other side."

"Lady Beatrice may look to the future," replied Mabel. "If Anne Hathaway had married one of the nobles of Queen Elizabeth's court, who would have ever heard of her name? It is to Shakespeare's renown that she owes the honour of recollection in the memory of the world."

"Much good may that honour do her, poor woman," said Percy, satirically. "The man or woman who looks forward to posterity, and trusts to posterity to preserve a fleeting fame, labours under a delusion. What good would it do *me* for a mob of contemplative fools to come and gape at my tombstone, and instruct their children that Percy Carrick was one of the lights of his age? Bah! a practical man wants power in his lifetime."

"You take a somewhat sordid view of this matter," said Mabel, almost coldly.

Percy smiled, good-humouredly. "Now I suppose our friend Meredith would give

utterance to some very lofty views about benefiting your kind ; that a man should strive to be great, in order to become a moral teacher. Very fine, very romantic, very disinterested ; all that kind of rhodomontade is sure to captivate young ladies of poetical proclivities ; but no man or woman of the world believes in it. Did Mr. Meredith think of benefiting the public when he was constructing his rhymes ? Not he, in sooth. He was thinking of the applause he would secure, the houses to which his success would gain him admission, and, sordid as it may sound to you, Plutus had as much share in his labours as Apollo."

" I cannot share your views," replied Mabel, almost angrily.

" Of course not : I never expected a romantic-minded young lady to show so much discernment," said Percy, calmly. " But take my word for it, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand, love of self, not love of our species, urges us to fame."

"I am unequal to argue the question with you, but my instinct tells me that your what I must call base theory of human conduct is unsound."

Percy paused for a moment before he answered ; then he continued in a grave, meaning voice, fixing his keen gaze steadily upon the countenance of his listener—

"What impelled Miss Mabel Markham, for example, to seek a bubble reputation at the footlights ? Was it a desire to instruct the dull and imaginative in the nature and depth of human passion ; to pour a new light upon the pages of our dramatic literature ? You do not answer : you cannot lay claim to either of these disinterested motives. Well then, shall I, as a practical man of the world, seek to fathom the true ones ? Was it not discontent, weariness of a dull and prosaic life, a yearning for any existence that promised some excitement, which first turned your thoughts in a theatrical direction ?"

"Perhaps you have guessed some por-

tion of the truth," said Mabel, in a low voice.

"Or—mind, I only put this as an alternative that will readily suggest itself to a man who has never harboured, or has outlived the romantic notions of youth," resumed Percy, in a smooth tone, but with his keen gaze still fastened on Mabel, "might it not be possible for the motive to have been even a more painful one? Some secret sorrow which was weighing on your heart, darkening all the days that you surrendered to its depressing influence; a sorrow perhaps, which you could confide to no one—might not this even have been the powerful impetus to the step which we all so deplored?"

Skilled as she was in the art of self-control, the deadly paleness of her cheek would have revealed her secret to a less acute observer than Percy Carrick. She rose suddenly, as if unable to endure this searching gaze, these words that almost compelled her to betray herself, and walked to the window. But if Percy expected the same

indiscretion from her that had proved so useful to him in the case of Beatrice, he showed in such an expectation his profound ignorance of woman's nature. Beatrice betrayed a secret, but not one of which she need be ashamed; the secret which Mabel might reveal must be one that would humiliate her in the eyes of her confidant, and in her own estimation. She recovered herself quickly—in her heart she was grateful to her stage instruction for that power—and turned the conversation.

“I was not aware that you were such a subtle analyst of motives,” she said, in a careless tone. “I think, perhaps, you were right in ascribing my ambition for the stage to the dulness of the life to which I found myself condemned. So far, I am an exception to my own theory. Still, *I* am not a great genius. It is to the *greatest* that I applied my theory. But we will not pursue the subject further: I am a woman, and, consequently, can only feel, not argue. I have had some new cartes-de-visite taken lately, which I think excellent. I shall be

very glad to get you one, if you will accept it," she added, with a smile.

"Can you ask such a question?" said Percy, in a tone of reproach.

"Perhaps my stage experience has taught me suspicion. We can act so well and naturally ourselves that we begin to discern acting in everybody else."

Percy shook his head, and said, in a voice of much meaning. "You are not such a good judge of human nature as I am then. I defy the best actors on the stage to act in private life so as to deceive me." That meaning voice, that keen gaze, all offered to Mabel a direct challenge; she escaped it, by leaving the room to fetch the portraits.

"This is a difficult witness; there's clearly nothing to be made out of her. She's too clever to criminate herself in words; in looks, poor child, she criminates herself plainly enough," was Percy's soliloquy. As he gave utterance to these reflections, his gaze was arrested by an object on the floor. He went to the spot, and picked it up. It was a locket of plain gold. "She

must have whisked it out of her pocket with her handkerchief; for it is not one she ever wears. Contains some likeness, perhaps: let me examine it;" and, suiting the action to the word, Mr. Carrick opened it, and saw, to his infinite surprise—the likeness of Cyril Meredith.

With the first glance, the villainous idea occurred to him that he might make out of this some substantial proof. He put it in his pocket, and stole back to his seat.

"Some people would call that thieving," he thought to himself; "but I had better take it, in case it has to be shown. I can put it back in an' out-of-the-way corner of the room, when it has served my purpose."

## CHAPTER XXV.

### A DISCLOSURE.

ALL unconscious of the discovery which had inspired Percy Carrick with the hope that he had got the one link wanting in the chain of success of his villainous scheme, Cyril Meredith was conversing with his betrothed. Alas ! much of the old frankness that had marked their intercourse was gone : a shadow of constraint seemed to hover over both, rendering them less like lovers than friends grown doubtful of each other's friendship. She, doubtful of his faith, even of his honour : he, resentful of these doubts which she would never convert into a direct charge.

" I shall see you at Lady B——'s to-night ?" she asked as he rose to depart.



“Not to-night I am afraid. I am invited to a bachelor’s party. There are two or three men who have been invited especially to meet me, and I can scarcely disappoint my host,” he replied. There was the formal expression of regret in his words, but none in his tones or manner. He was too sincere to mask his real feelings, and these were feelings of resentment at the capricious conduct observed to him lately by Beatrice. It might have been her chagrin at discovering coldness where it had hitherto been such a stranger, (or was it that she had grown more exacting with the growth of her jealousy ?) which prompted her to answer angrily—

“I should not wish you to renounce the prospect of so much pleasure for *me*.”

He replied in a voice that betrayed an anger almost equal to her own—

“Perhaps you would be unreasonable if you did.”

Her lips curled scornfully as she said ;  
“You cannot accuse me of *that*. I have

not exacted many sacrifices from you as yet, Cyril."

That word "sacrifices" galled him : he thought he discovered in it a hidden allusion to her own.

"You mean to intimate, perhaps, that I should show greater alacrity in self-sacrifice in return for the great example you have set me?" he asked coldly.

"I have made no sacrifices ; if the world would give them such a name, I made them because they were pleasant to me to make," replied Beatrice in a calmer tone : then she added with her former impulsiveness—"I have told you before that I ask nothing from you which you are not disposed to give without asking. Beatrice Neville is not a beggar for kindness," she said proudly : the tears were ready to come into her eyes in spite of that proud manner.

"I must repeat that these speeches are enigmas to me which I cannot solve," exclaimed Cyril angrily and impatiently. Her manner seemed to him that of a capricious, irritable woman : it was natural

that it should seem so to him. He could not guess the truth, that it was the sole way in which a proud woman could indicate a shattered faith in her idol.

"Do not attempt so thankless a task : time may solve them for you," she said with a cold smile. "I have detained you too long : pray let me repair my selfishness at once."

"We meet again to-morrow," said Cyril.

"If you have no better engagement," was the irritating answer.

Cyril left the house with feelings angry and excited. "Day after day am I thus tacitly accused," he thought indignantly, "and yet I press her in vain for a direct charge. Can I believe this to be the petulance of a woman who discovers that she mistook her own heart, and has not the courage to avow her mistake ? If I were sure of that, you should be freed from your promise, aye, before another hour had passed, Lady Beatrice. Was I not mad, after all, to go amongst these people for a bride ? Did not Ruth Meredith tell me—'When you

have served their purpose, they will throw you off like a worn-out glove?' And yet I cannot believe this of *her*; it were to doubt all that is fair and noble in nature, to believe that she made me love her just to satisfy a coquette's vanity. That vanity would have been satisfied without going to the length of gaining her father's consent. No, no! it is not that, there is a mystery here I cannot solve, but I will compel her to solve it shortly."

But a few moments had elapsed since Cyril Meredith's departure, when Percy Carrick was announced. There was a gravity on his brow, in his whole manner, that imparted a sudden presentiment to Beatrice, that he was a messenger of evil. Alas! she was right.

"My dear Beatrice," he said, assuming a voice of deep feeling, "I have come on a painful business, which I heartily wish could have been committed to other hands. My deep anxiety in all that concerns your welfare has alone nerved me to the execution of this task."

In spite of her habitual self-control, Beatrice's voice faltered, as she replied—

“ I am ready to hear you. Do not delay what you have to communicate.”

“ You will remember,” said Percy, still in the same tone of deep sympathy, “ that when, months ago, I ventured to question the wisdom of your choice—when I asked you whether, as an old friend, you would permit me to reveal to you anything I might have discovered to justify the views I entertained — your answer to that question was, ‘ Prefer any charge you have to make against Mr. Meredith to his face.’ ”

Here he paused, and Beatrice said, faintly, “ I remember.”

“ You may have learned since then that although there are many circumstances in the career of a man which, if seriously inquired into, would not redound to his credit, yet their disclosure would procure for the man who revealed them the character of a scandal-monger, or, more contemptible still, the appellation of an austere hypocrite, who

denounces the indiscretion which he himself may share."

At this point he paused again, and Beatrice said, faintly, "It may be so."

"Nine-tenths of the moral offenders in the world escape, because suspicion, which arraigns them truly in private, cannot bring against them a charge sufficiently proven to demand the interference of justice," continued Percy. "There are many points in the conduct of a lover which may give just offence to a woman, whose position makes her the sole judge of the conduct that she has a right to exact; and yet that woman, were she to summon the world to a tribunal, might fail in influencing the judges whose aid she invoked to pass the sentence she demanded, simply because a judge might require more proof than she could give."

Again Percy paused at the end of his artfully constructed periods, and this time no reply came. A deadly pallor had crept over the cheek of his listener.

"You can comprehend now why I should shrink from the ordeal of being brought

forward as Mr. Meredith's accuser, even although, in my opinion, there could be no question of his guilt. I have an important secret to communicate to you ; but the revelation of that secret depends upon your disposition to conceal or proclaim the communicant."

At that direct appeal, Beatrice had no choice but to reply. The words came with great difficulty. "Why object to sustain the accusation in your own person?"

And Percy answered, with an assumption of high-mindedness that he was far from feeling, "Because I would not willingly expose myself to the charge of playing the spy upon another man's actions, even although I held as my excuse for so contemptible a rôle, the deep—the more than friendship that I entertain for yourself."

"And what if I betray this interview as far as it has gone to Mr. Meredith and leave to him the task of demanding your charge against him?" asked Beatrice.

Percy was not a coward, but he felt

an involuntary thrill of fear at this threat. But he was playing for a great stake, and he resolved to brave the danger, trusting that her eagerness to know the truth would never suffer him to depart with his secret untold. He replied, in a manner at once dignified and firm,—

“In the first place, I should consider that you had not acted honourably by me ; in the second, I should refuse to answer Mr. Meredith’s questions, and elect to abide by any and every result entailed by my refusal.”

As he had anticipated, that determined answer removed all scruple from the wavering mind of Beatrice. “Tell me what you know, I accede to your terms,” she said.

“One moment,” said Percy Carrick cautiously. “My terms are these—first, you will not disclose the source of the information ; secondly, you will not reveal the information itself. The last point is as important, if not more so than the first.”

“On what grounds can I justify the



action I may choose to take if I am not at liberty to state the reason which has prompted it?" asked Beatrice passionately.

And Percy replied in a calm tone. "If, after hearing the evidence I lay before you, you resolve to dismiss Mr. Meredith from the position he holds towards you—the course to which your woman's pride will urge you without my aid—you can justify your action upon the grounds of the general rumour which has industriously connected his name with that of Mabel Markham for a long time."

Caught in the artful net which Percy had woven round her, Beatrice accepted the hard conditions of her ensnarer.

"I promise all," she said; and then, with a sudden passion in her tones, exclaimed: "And now that I am as docile as you wish, keep me no longer on the rack!"

"Your suspense will soon be over," replied Percy in a pathetic voice. He took from his pocket the locket he had stolen from Mabel Markham's room, and touching

the spring, handed it to her, with the likeness of Cyril Meredith open to her gaze.

"That locket belongs to Mabel Markham," he said gravely.

With a passionate gesture, Beatrice dashed it to the ground.

"How did it come into your possession?"

"Beatrice!" answered the cold schemer, turning away his head, and speaking with the air of a man whose natural nobility of character inspired the deepest shame at the confession he was about to make. "For your sake: for the sake of the woman—whom I have known, have loved"—his voice faltered skilfully here—"from childhood; I stooped to become what I blush to remember—a *common thief*. By chance I saw the locket, its spring burst open, I suppose from its fall on the floor; hastening to pick it up, I saw Meredith's likeness. Need I describe my indignation when I found in that damning proof my worst suspicions realized? I had no intention of taking it from its proper resting-place; but

I knew your generous and noble nature ;  
I feared you could not be brought to believe  
the guilt of the man you loved so deeply  
on no stronger ground than that of my  
bare assertion."

He paused, and Beatrice said at length,  
in a hollow voice—

"Your conditions shall be observed. But  
leave me now."

"And how will you act towards Meredith?" he added, anxiously.

"As he deserves," she answered, passionately. "O Heaven! to think that Beatrice Neville should be brought so low as this : to be made the puppet to a man's ambition !"

Percy put on a face and air of the deepest sympathy.

"Leave me now. I read your pity in your eyes. I shall see pity henceforth in every gaze that rests upon me. Another time I will give you thanks for your zeal in saving me from the abyss into which I was about to plunge. I cannot thank you now. Go, go !"

The traitor stole noiselessly from the presence of the woman whose life he had darkened, whose heart he had broken ; and when he was gone, Beatrice, all her passion spent, bruised in spirit by these terrible revelations, bowed her head in her hands, and wept long and bitterly.

How could she shatter by any effort of reason that web of guile and falsehood woven by so cunning a schemer ? Every circumstance conspired to strengthen her belief in the assertions of Carrick, and to destroy her faith in the man she had loved. The rumours that had reached her ears from various sources, the proof afforded by the locket, constituted damning evidence of his treachery. How could she know that Mabel had had that miniature taken from a larger portrait, to treasure away, as she had fondly hoped, from all profaning eyes.

In vain did Beatrice strive to check her tears ; were they not the agonizing drops which despair lets fall upon the grave of perished hopes ? The paradise of her

youth had been foully invaded by this smiling serpent. Gone for ever her faith in the idol she had so worshipped ; exiled for ever from the Eden which love had opened to her gaze, driven beyond the gate before which the flaming sword of truth scared back the baffled wanderer ; sent forth once more into the cold world in which, before the advent of this bitter love, amidst all that could satisfy her pride, she had found nothing that could content her heart.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### BARRY'S EXPOSURE.

FROM Beatrice's house, Cyril went to his club. When a man is perturbed in thought, *home* is often the last place to which he would carry his grief. There is a certain tranquillity and sacredness about home that assorts ill with the misery of an afflicted soul. It is in the privacy of home that we have nursed our loftiest aspirations, nourished our brightest hopes: it is with the thought of home, the theatre of all our joys, that we have woven the future. Do we love, home it is that shall impart a sacredness to our love: are we successful, it is in the home gatherings that the hearty wishes and congratulations of our friends

sound most sincere. And, therefore, it is this home which should be connected with the brightest epochs of our life, that a man would fain fly from when his spirit is darkened by calamity, choosing any other refuge for his despair.

Mr. Harwood was at the club. At the present moment his cynicism would have pleased Cyril: it would have been an echo of his own galled and wounded heart. But on this particular day, our modern Diogenes was in a very genial mood.

“Good day to you!” he said courteously to Cyril. “Your last book has been a very great success, I believe. Glad to hear it. Accept my congratulations.”

Cyril thanked him, and Mr. Harwood continued the conversation.

“I took to literature myself when I was a young man. Wrote a novel that I thought very fine; expected it to eclipse every other novel in the world—by the way, I read it over last week, and it seemed to have lost much of its former brilliancy. Well, the reviewers handled it so unmer-

cifully, that I would have challenged each of them if I could have identified him. I gave it up after that. I found my temper was too irascible for literature."

Cyril smiled, as in duty bound, and made some commonplace reply.

"Have you seen Lady Beatrice lately?" asked Harwood presently.

"I have just come from visiting her."

"Noble woman!" said Mr. Harwood warmly; adding, "Not been looking so well of late, though, I fancy. London does not agree with her so well as Cheverton. That active life of benevolence down there suits her admirably. She's something of a poet too, likes to gaze upon the face of Nature, loves the skies, and flowers and birds."

How sweet would this praise of Beatrice have sounded to his ears at any other time! Now it could only awaken painful feelings. He rose abruptly, and went home to dress.

Mr. A——had been a celebrated author: for several years he had written nothing,



but his name was still well known, in spite of the many candidates for fame who had secured the public ear since his retirement. But although he took no active part in literature, he still mixed with literary men, and was a leader amongst them. He was a very acute critic, and to him came many youthful authors for an opinion on the work that was to win for them immortality. A—— never flattered, and to his valuable suggestions many a promising writer owed alterations and improvements in his pages which rendered his work more sterling. At the dinner table to-night were assembled some of the best known names in the literary world. Amongst the guests was Digby Barry ; he was not a *littérateur* proper, but mixed much in the society of those who were, and was esteemed, as I have said before, something of a wit.

A well-known essayist and magazine writer separated him and Cyril ; the two men had exchanged no salutation, but in Barry's glance there was a sullenness, indicative of no good feeling towards the

man who had thwarted his designs upon Mabel.

The conversation led to the merits of a new work brought out by a young friend of A——'s, which had proved a complete failure.

The host expressed his regret and sympathy.

"He would not be guided by me," he said. "I advised him to reconstruct the story; it was well written, and the characters clearly drawn, but there was no vitality in the plot. Now, it requires great talents and experience to make a new domestic story, without any stirring incidents thoroughly interesting. My young friend could not see this, hence his failure."

"It is a common case," remarked a well-known author; "there are many young men of considerable literary talents who fail because they venture into print without that previous training necessary for the cultivation of their faculties. If a man is going to play in a great cricket match, he,

although he knows the game, thinks it necessary to practise with some professional bowler before he enters the lists. If he wished to fence he would take lessons from a master ; to box, or run, or walk, he would go through all the preliminaries of good training. But in the world of letters, a man who can express his thoughts in tolerably fair English rushes at once into the arena, where he is hopelessly distanced by a hundred keen and disciplined rivals."

"No, no," continued the author, warming with the subject, "a man may have great facility in writing essays on many subjects, but the sustained effort required to construct a great novel, is possessed by few. Of all books, the novel is the most compact and attractive medium for wise and earnest teaching. In its pages human passions are laid bare, villainy is baffled, wrong redressed, and honour and virtue justified."

"The highest man," said A——, "is the teacher ; but in order to teach, he must

*know.* In the higher walks of art there are few traces of lofty thought; now and then there are indications of genius, but they are fitful, ambiguous, and impracticable. In all the arts of common life men prepare themselves for the exercises of their craft, and men's varied faculties are drawn out by an immutable necessity, in proportion to their wants. What said the Grecian sage? 'If you want a pilot, you would choose him for his knowledge of navigation, a physician for his knowledge of disease, a shipwright for his knowledge of ships, a general for his knowledge of marshalling forces and drawing out armies.' So in the lower stages of existence amongst craftsmen and artisans, a shoemaker for making shoes, and the husbandman for tillage. There is more honest preparation and conscientious effort in the lower walks of life than in the higher. Yet all these special arts are but fragments of truth. It is the poet and philosopher only who can unite them in one harmonious whole; they alone can search the vault of heaven,

the globe of earth ; they alone can penetrate the catholic sense of things, and reveal to the gaze of man the secrets of nature ; they alone can scan all human passions, measure all human wants, and evolve from the intellect *that* which experience can never give. They, above all, are universal in their sympathies. Recognising neither sect nor creed, appealing to no special class, they inculcate truth while they compassionate error, and know that whether man be pure and unsullied or guilty and sin laden, he once lay lovingly on his mother's lap, a living *spotless* soul. Uniting all men in the ties of a common brotherhood, we turn to their pages as to a mirror in which our own image is reflected."

The subject was not continued, and the conversation became general. Soon there were indications of departure, and Meredith, after bidding his host good-night, walked to his club.

Sounds of hilarity came from the smoking-room, where, on entering, he found himself amongst men, to many of whom he was

scarcely known. They talked of all sorts of matters ; the new ministry, Russian aggrandizement, the upheaval of '48, the unsettled state of Europe ; all followed in succession till some one alluded to the drama.

"Have you seen Miss Markham in the new piece?" said one of the members to his friend next him.

"I have—the handsomest woman on the stage, undoubtedly," he replied.

"And one of the most virtuous," added the first speaker.

At this moment, Digby Barry entered, and catching the last words of the speaker, asked, "Of whom are you speaking?"

"Miss Markham," was the answer.

"That is a bold assertion ; the most virtuous !"

"Can you disprove it?" asked another member sharply.

The *roué* shrugged his shoulders in an ambiguous manner. "Proof of such matters is not easily procured."

His opponent replied hotly, "Then I

think it most dishonourable on your part and, I must say, d——d cowardly, to sneer away a woman's reputation after such a fashion."

"Oh ! it will make very little difference ; I only anticipate," said Barry, with a glance of hatred towards Meredith. " She is too beautiful to keep her reputation long ; she will go to the highest bidder in time."

Meredith had with great difficulty stifled his indignation during this dialogue. His wish to avoid any public scandal in connection with Mabel, had alone restrained him from answering Barry himself. But roused by these coarse and shameful words, prudence forsook him. He forgot all present, and the construction that might be put upon his championship in his burning desire to brand the calumniator of a defenceless woman, whose only shield was her innocence.

" LIAR !" he exclaimed, fiercely.

There was a general movement at the tone of intense passion that characterised the delivery of that word. Both men had risen

to their feet ; Cyril's left hand was grasping his chair tightly, as if he hoped by that convulsive action to subdue the impulse which urged him to strike the slanderer to the ground.

" Infamous liar !" he repeated, in a tone of imperious scorn ; " what reason have *you*, a man whose character is known, aye, and *despised* by all who know you, to slander with your foul tongue the fair fame of an innocent girl."

He turned to the company, and said in a calmer voice—

" I will tell you the reason, gentlemen. A few days ago this man, this *roué*, sent to Miss Markham a present, accompanied by a note, behind whose artful wording any man of the world could easily read a sinister design. Miss Markham showed it to me as her sole guardian, the guardian to whose charge her father, my best and dearest friend, entrusted her at his death. I sent back this present, with a letter which showed him plainly that his villainous purpose was detected and baffled."



A general murmur of applause went round the room at Cyril's clear and manly statement. That hostile manifestation restored Barry's bull-dog courage, which the indignation of his enemy had for the moment quelled.

"Insolent fool!" he began—

"Silence! and hear me out," thundered Cyril. "I would not utter one word of reproach in a company like this, against a career, contemptible as it is, which you have devoted for years to the cultivation of vice, in all its hideous perfection. There are others as bad, some perhaps worse than you, and I would not be so unjust as to make you the solitary scapegoat. But did your associates share my contempt, they would scout from their society, as a leper, the dastard who was base enough to slander, in the presence of his fellow-men, the woman whom he had failed to ruin."

The sense of justice, which is never wanting in any assemblage, here impelled the listeners to break all restraint. A loud burst of applause testified to their contempt

for the paltry creature whose real character Cyril had thus mercilessly exposed.

At this juncture several members rose to interpose, but ere they could say a word Digby Barry had rushed at Cyril, who, evading the rush, levelled a blow at him, that stretched him senseless on the ground.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### PARTED.

EVERYONE acquainted with London society knows with what mysterious swiftness such a scene as that described in the last chapter, is telegraphed everywhere. In less than two hours after its occurrence the clubs were in full discussion on it; and from the clubs the information soon travelled to every house that was open that night. Of course had the narrative been confided in each case to an eye-witness only one interpretation could have been put upon it by the listener. But in the hands of half a hundred narrators, it became twisted, distorted, almost beyond recognition, and the majority who heard it, and

communicated it to others, were under the impression that such a scene was occasioned by the jealousy of rivals. And amongst others, it was told to Beatrice and her father in this manner.

Lord Ravensworth only spoke once during the drive home.

“Your suitor might show more respect to you if not to himself, than to engage in a brawl about an actress,” he said, bitterly.

Beatrice answered in a firm tone ; “I feel the insult as keenly as you do, and I shall know how to resent it.”

The old nobleman looked at her, anxiously. Her face was very pale, and her manner seemed pervaded by that calmness which tells the keen observer that the mind has been brought to approve a resolution that pains the heart. But he forbore to make any comment.

The next day Cyril called upon her ; Mr. Barry had uttered some vague threats, but as yet Cyril had received no message from him. The fact was, Barry had resolved to pocket the affront, and trust to

time to remove any unfavourable impression of his courage.

Beatrice rose as he entered. He could read his doom in her face, and the sense of her injustice hardened his already embittered feelings.

"Mr. Meredith," she said, in a clear, cold voice. Alas! through what a terrible ordeal had she passed, to acquire that haughty self-control. "It is best that our betrothal should end. It was a mistake on both sides. I mistook your character; you, possibly, mistook mine. After such a confession as this, any attempt at mutual deception would be useless."

"You are the best judge," he answered haughtily.

"Had I been disposed to revoke the judgment on your character which my heart has so long passed," she resumed, in a firm tone, "the scene of last night would have turned the balance against you. I could not recognize in a man who made another woman the occasion of a public

scandal a husband whom I could either respect or love."

"I will not attempt to appeal against your decision. I have been justly punished for my folly in thinking that a betrothal like ours could ever stand the test of calmer reason and reflection," he said, bitterly. Then he added, in a voice that was almost indignant, "One word, Lady Beatrice, before I say farewell for ever. If ever you recall, amid the more important matters that engross your attention, this period of our brief and foolish dream, remember that you based your rejection of your unworthy suitor on one of the best and noblest actions of his life: the act of defending an innocent girl, to whom he was the sole protector, from the slanders of a licentious villain."

He paused for a moment, and then said, as he turned towards the door, "Farewell, Lady Beatrice! If ever a time should come when you need a champion, I trust that he will not have the same justice meted to

him by the woman he loves that you have meted to me.”

Ere Beatrice could reply, he was gone. How often did those bitter words ring in her ears afterwards !

END OF VOL. II.













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